



NOVEL

8

CLASSROOM
OF THE ELITE
YEAR **2**

STORY: **SYOUGO KINUGASA**
ART: **TOMOSESHUNSAKU**



CLASSROOM  **OF THE ELITE** ^{YEAR} **2**

NOVEL 8

"YOU KNOW, GUYS FROM A BUNCH OF CLASSES
HAVE BEEN ASKING ME RECENTLY IF YOU'RE
AVAILABLE OR NOT."

"N-N-N-NO, I DON'T, I DON'T!"

"ICHINOSE-SAN,
DO YOU HAVE A BOYFRIEND
OR SOMETHING LIKE THAT?"

"HMM? E-EH!?"

THE UNEXPECTED QUESTION
THREW ICHINOSE OFF.

"OH, IS THAT SO?
THEN IS THERE SOMEONE YOU LIKE?"



KIKYOU
KUSHIDA

KIYOTAKA
AYANOKOUJI

KAKERU
RYUEN

ROYAL
MTLs





"THERE'S NO WAY---"

RIGHT AFTER THAT, SHE EXTENDED HER ARMS OUT,
AND PLACED HER PALMS UP LIKE BARS AGAINST
THE WALL WITH ALL HER MIGHT.

"EVERYTHING'S FINE... EVERYTHING'S FINE..."

SHE MUTTERED THOSE WORDS,
AND SUDDENLY HALTED HER MOVEMENTS.





WELCOME TO CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE YEAR 2



CLASSROOM  **2**
OF THE ELITE YEAR

NOVEL 8

STORY BY

Syougo Kinugasa

ART BY

Tomoseshunsaku



**CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE
YEAR 2 VOLUME 8**

SYOUGO KINUGASA

ROYALMTLS

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Kanzaki Ryūji's Monologue

A SMART PERSON stays away from danger. I've spent my childhood keeping my distance from people. Why did I make that choice? Because it was easier for me to do so and, more importantly, because it kept me out of trouble. I didn't make any close friends, and I didn't make any enemies. This made it easy for me to remain neutral.

One day, however, I was involved in a fight between a group of children, simply because I was nearby. Three of the four kids, excluding myself, were relentlessly accusing the fourth. The three of them acted arrogantly all throughout the incident, but not without reason: a single lie is the cause of their behavior.

The child being denounced, who was visibly upset, had told lies to the other three. It really should have been something trivial. It was regarding whether or not he had gotten an autograph from a celebrity. The three of them wanted him to admit that he had lied and apologize to everyone. On the other hand, the liar insisted that he had not lied and refused to apologize.

I, who happened to be there, objectively analyzed the situation and urged the kid who told the lie to admit it, but the kid refused to relent until the end. A flimsy lie. Meaningless stubbornness. I thought the matter might escalate to the point of harm, but even so, I did nothing. The boy was wrong for telling such a useless lie.

I didn't know if it was to show off or what, but it was really stupid.

I didn't need to help. It was none of my business.

I truly felt that way.

No, I even thought that he should be beaten at least once to learn from it

But... In the end, the kid who told that lie got away with it.

An accomplice of the lying boy suddenly appeared and saved the child. He protected him without questioning him, simply because he was his friend.

I didn't agree. That was not justice.

The right thing to do would have been to support the three children who hadn't lied.

I fell into a state of uncertainty.

Who was right?

Was it the three who told the truth but exhibited arrogance, or the one who had lied through his teeth?

Was it the third person who knew it was a lie and helped his friend?

There was one adult who watched the entire scene unfold.

He placed his hand on my head and said, "If you don't have the power to help, you can run away or ignore it. But if you have the power and don't use it, you are a fool."

I couldn't understand it at the time. I wondered whether he meant that I should have helped the liar after all. But as I grew into an adult, I understood. Helping does not necessarily imply helping only the child who told a lie. If I had the power to control the situation, I could have brought the situation to a close no matter what perspective I held...

It was at that moment that something within me came to life, something I thought I didn't possess.

I still remember the words of that person I met.

When I entered Advanced Nurturing High School, I chose to socialize with others, even though I wasn't good at it. I learned to help others who were in need, if only a little. I hoped to be there for Ichinose, who was recognized as the class leader, and support her.

However, in the end, I was not able to do so, and my heart was broken.

Ayanokōji Kiyotaka's words rescued me from such a situation.

Ayanokōji... Truly, fate is a mysterious thing.

Chapter 1: If You Know Your Enemy and Know Yourself, You Will Not Be in Danger in a Hundred Battles

IT WAS LATE NOVEMBER, and the day of the long-awaited school trip was finally approaching. On my way to school on a sunny yet chilly morning, I spotted a small group of three students walking ahead of me, with Haruka in the center. They didn't look too enthusiastic, but they still seemed to be talking about something as though trying hard to keep up a conversation.

"Don't you want to call out to them?" Kei, walking along next to me, said something like that.

"I don't mind. It's the way it's been since Airi was expelled."

I'm no longer needed in that group.

"Then I'm not going to mention it again. If it's okay with you, I know it's the right thing to do."

Since the state of the former Ayanokōji Group is a matter regarding other people's business, Kei has no reason to care too deeply about it.

"Besides, this means that I get to keep you to myself."

She gave me a sincere smile with no further thought. I'm sure that I've become a pillar for her after spending so much time together.

"I'm really looking forward to the school trip. Where do you think it'll be?"

"I haven't given up on my dream of going to Kyoto."

"Oh yeah, I remember you saying that. I don't mind as long as it's anywhere but Kyoto. For some reason, Kyoto is the only place I'm not willing to go."

"You dislike Kyoto that much?"

"Well, it's because of all the temples and cultural assets. It doesn't seem fun at all, does it?"

I think that's one of the best parts of Kyoto...

I guess for Kei, visiting temples and shrines isn't fun.

"The destination of the trip is important, but don't you care about the results of the final exam?"

"I'm not too concerned about the results, and I think I did pretty well for myself. This is all thanks to you, isn't it?"

Although her overconfidence is a little problematic, it's undeniable.

Even though a high score is unlikely, Kei's minimum score is rising.

I can certainly see her growth when I score her assignments, although there's only a small change.

"I think I should spend more time studying with you, just like Sudō-kun."

A corresponding amount of time spent studying will not necessarily improve her academic performance as much as Sudō. Kei probably doesn't understand this. Motivation is very important, but the teacher's skill is just as crucial. The reason Sudō has grown so spectacularly is unmistakably attributed to the talent of his educator, Horikita.

This aspect probably gives her an edge over Keisei, who has the same academic ability.

In the case of Sudō's academic results, they aren't based on the foundation that more time equals better results, as Kei believes them to be.

It would be easy to forcefully raise Kei's academic ability by giving her a thorough education, but that's not my role.

All I have to do is the bare minimum. I only have to ensure that she is able to study.

In time, I hope that the right student will be able to take over the job smoothly.

1

Today, two hours were set aside in the morning for matters related to the school trip.

In a normal school, they might've briefed us a little earlier, but for the students of this school, the final exam is more important. They have to know the result of the finals first.

It wouldn't be humorous if, after being informed of the school trip schedule, a student dropped out of school because of the final exam.

"So, I will now announce the results of the second semester final examinations."

The air was tense. However, no students were discouraged. This time last year, there was a different exam called the Paper Shuffle. Kushida's plans and Ryuen's influence nearly jeopardized the exam, but Horikita's strategy and capabilities were equally as strong. However, this year was different.

The rules were standardized: students were required to take a test designed by the school, and if they scored below the cutoff point, they would be expelled. It was also a class-based competition, with first place gaining 50 Class Points, second place gaining 25 Class Points, third place losing 25 Class Points, and fourth place losing 50 Class Points. It was purely a competition for class points.

The cutoff scores were averages of 39 points or less in all subjects. A close examination of the content revealed that the students could easily avoid red marks in any subject if they took their studies seriously.

"Regarding this year's final exam results, I'll start with the lowest-ranked student."

Chabashira-sensei's expression was firm. It seemed as though she was trying to agitate the students, but I guess maintaining a proper sense of tension was necessary.

"The student who got the lowest grade..."

The bottom grades are considered more important than the top grades.

"...Was Hondō, who got an average score of 53."

"Wow! Me? But I got 53 points, so that's not so bad, right? I should be happy!"

Hondō's joy must've been bittersweet, considering he didn't fail but was still at the bottom of the class.

Although he had always been in the lowest group, this was probably the first time Hondō placed last.

After the names of the lower-ranked students were announced one by one, the names of the higher ranks began to be called soon after. It was safe to say that the scores of the lower ranks have definitely been raised.

The first of these factors was undoubtedly the Unanimous Vote Special Exam that led to Airi's expulsion from the school.

Since that exam, students who ranked the lowest in OAA developed a sense of urgency to avoid being expelled, so they no longer disregarded giving their best in any exam.

Kei also didn't do as badly as expected, scoring an average of 56 points. She, who only wanted to study with me, was steadily improving her grades. However, I will have to solve her academic issues as soon as possible. Since I only plan on teaching the bare minimum, there's a risk that she'll be separated from the other students due to a gap in growth potential. I should ask Horikita, Keisei, or even Yōsuke to teach her.

The monitor also calculated and sequentially displayed the score, total score, and average score amongst the subjects for each of the students whose names were called. I was in 12th place, slowly and steadily rising in the rankings.

Finally, the top 10 in the class were announced.

In 10th place was Sudō. Although we were a little concerned, the result was similar to the previous time, Sudō attaining a solid score to move into the top group. He improved his ranking by one while also setting a new personal best.

Finally, first place went to Horikita and Keisei with an average score of 93.5 points, who usually tied for first place anyways.

“Regarding the scores of each class, we surpassed Ichinose's class, taking second place. Well done.”

First place went to Sakayanagi's Class A, second to Horikita's Class B, third to Ichinose's Class D, and fourth to Ryuen's Class C.

This raised the class points by 25. However, in Sakayanagi's Class A, even the lower-ranked students performed fairly well, and we failed to get first place once again. The gap between the two classes was minute, but it was still there.

“Now, I know that you're looking forward to the school trip, as shown by your hard work on the final exam. But there's one thing I want you to do before we discuss it.”

With these words, an image appeared on the monitor.

Following Chabashira-sensei's instructions, each student's tablet displayed a chart with the names of his or her classmates. It was the same as the monitor in front of us.

“There are three items: name, gender, and number, of which the name and gender are already filled in.”

As Chabashira-sensei said, all the classmates' names were listed. Only the number was blank, which meant that the numbers were to be entered right now.

The general table could be understood at a glance, but it was unclear what the numbers would represent. Not a single student understood what to do.

“The table lists the students in the second year Class B, that is, this class. You can see that there’s a blank space next to the names and genders with a small number next to it. You will start numbering from the first number until 37, which is the amount of students in the class excluding yourself. You cannot use the same number twice. First of all, you must type “myself” in the number field of your name.”

There were 38 students in the 2nd year Class B, excluding Airi and Yamauchi, who had been expelled from the school.

A different number, up to 37, can be allocated to each student, except for myself. The question is, what did this number mean?

It was unthinkable to assign them randomly without any meaning.

Everyone operated their tablets and typed in their own box as instructed.

After confirming this, Chabashira-sensei began to explain the numbers.

“The numbers you’re about to assign represent how you evaluate your fellow classmates from your point of view. In any case, it’s important that you give your evaluations according to your own criteria.”

Did this mean that we’re ranking our classmates?

No... Moving down the chart, it seemed that this chart existed for not only our own classmates, but the other three classes as well in the second year.

“As some of you may have already noticed, I'm going to ask you to do this ranking for the entire second year, class by class. With the students in the other classes, there may be some that you have never even spoken to, but that’s also the same criteria that they have. All of them are to be assigned a number.”

Students evaluating students. We did something somewhat similar last year, but I would say it’s also very different. What could be the point of making the students do this?

“Of course, we don't tell the students what numbers they have assigned to each other and we, the homeroom teachers, will never know how the students have ranked each other,” she said.

In other words, the chart is controlled by the people in charge of running the school.

“And while you're filling out this form, you’re not allowed to speak or refer to the OAA. You're only allowed to use the information you remember. It defeats the purpose if you set the order based on the school's evaluation without considering any of your own personal feelings.”

They're also restricting us from assigning numbers based on any data collected from the school.

“Seriously, there are a lot of girls I've never spoken to, and I have no idea about their OAA or anything like that, so it's going to be random, is that okay...?”

Unlike some of the students who boasted a wide range of friendships, Hondō muttered apprehensively.

“Yes. The most important thing to remember is that you can't just take a look on the internet. The school will use this list for a certain purpose, so you're on your own no matter what the outcome is.”

Basically, it should be in the order of a certain criteria, but in the end, it would be up to the individual filling out the form to input numbers at his or her own discretion. In return, they couldn't complain about the consequences that may ensue in the future.

The liberty to evaluate each student based on the interactions we've had with them so far.

Doing it randomly may come back to bite you, so take the challenge seriously. That's what she's saying.

“You have one hour to finish. If you fail to finish within the time limit, you will not receive the full explanation for the school trip.”

No one would've thought that they would be asked to do this before the school trip.

While the students remained puzzled, Chabashira-sensei instructed us to begin immediately.

We all started with our minds still unprepared.

I decided to start with Class A, postponing the most time-consuming class, my own. If it were just about raw ability, I would have chosen Sakayanagi as the first, but what I was considering this time was an overall evaluation.

It would be fine to base all decisions on simple likes and dislikes as a person. It was also up to the discretion of the individual to choose the person who was easy to get along with and whom he or she liked the most. Whatever the case may be, the numbers should be allocated based on clear criteria.

I intended to start filling out the chart right away, but it was surprisingly difficult. The safest thing to do would be to consider the current overall ability value from my point of view. For students with whom I had no contact, it was fine to rank them based on the OAA value I remembered.

Once I was content with this method, I started from number 1. This was probably the same for many students, but I would say that it was set in stone that Sakayanagi will place as number one in Class A.

It took me approximately 20 minutes to complete the evaluations for the other three classes. The only one remaining was Class B, where I am.

This wasn't a simple class to grade, as they required more consideration regarding various factors besides the OAA.

I'll consider their hidden potential, communication skills, and growth potential. Although there will be some overlap with the OAA, I think Yōsuke would be first at this point.

If you take into account not only his simple overall value but also his day-to-day contribution to the class, he's the best choice. Without Yōsuke, there would be no cooperation in this class.

And for No. 2, I chose Kōenji. His hidden potential and the concrete benefits he brought to the class, such as his contribution in the second-year desert island test and his unintended contribution in the sports festival, are extremely significant. Even if we ignore his strange personality and lack of cooperation, it would still be a fair evaluation.

Kōenji is undeniably responsible for the current status of Class B.

The students who have always performed well academically, such as Horikita, Keisei, and Mii-chan, are also highly rated.

I looked up after inputting the evaluations of all the students. Nearly 40 minutes had passed, but no one had finished other than me.

That was what I thought, but when my eyes met those of Chabashira-sensei's, who was observing the students, I realized that Kōenji, who was sitting beside me, had finished first.

I couldn't be sure, but I guess he must have assigned the numbers without thinking about it. He was already blowing lightly on his fingernails without even looking at the tablet again.

What special test could these numbers be used for other than group formation?

When the school inspects these results for example, is it possible to conduct an exam with only the students who were selected as the first and second in each class overall? On the other hand, if only students with low overall ability are gathered, they will have to do a well-balanced task.

However, if this is the case, the students should be told in advance that they will be assigned a number based on their abilities, and there would be no need to have them evaluate it themselves. The risk of distorting the competition by assigning numbers based on likes and dislikes would be much higher.

2

With only a few minutes left until the time limit, Chabashira-sensei called out.

“Alright. It looks like everyone has finished, so that's the end of the list-making process.”

It seemed that everyone successfully completed their evaluations in time.

“It's a little earlier than we expected, but let's start talking about the school trip now.”

“Yes! Finally!”

Ike and the others clapped their hands, freed from the rigid list-making process. Unlike before, Chabashira-sensei paid no attention to Ike and began operating her tablet. We were told that we would be going on a school trip, but we still don't know where we're going.

The Unanimous Vote Special Exam offered us three choices.

Hokkaido, Kyoto, and Okinawa.

Each class had to cast one vote for each of these three locations, and the location with the highest number of votes would be chosen for the excursion.

Incidentally, I was among the minority who chose Kyoto, as did Horikita and Keisei.

The votes in this class went to Hokkaido, but that didn't mean there was no hope. If two of the three classes voted for Kyoto, our hopes would be fulfilled.

We now await what the results will be...

“First, let's see the results of the Unanimous Vote Special Exam.”

Chabashira-sensei took a pause for a few seconds for dramatic effect.

“...As a result of each class's choice, Hokkaido, which received three of the class votes, was designated as the school trip destination.”

Hearing this left me both delighted and disappointed. It was a mixed result.

However, the fact that the majority of the class had voted for Hokkaido also made it safe to say that many were happy. So, Hokkaido was decided.

From the appearance of Horikita's back, she didn't appear to be disappointed. Even Keisei didn't seem particularly dissatisfied.

Surprisingly, Sudō and the others, who had been wanting to go to Okinawa, also showed signs of having already accepted the situation from the beginning. Although we weren't allowed to share the information regarding class decisions, it was possible that they heard rumors about the situation from other classes.

I felt a little disappointed, but Kyoto is Kyoto and Hokkaido is Hokkaido. For me, no matter where I end up, it will always be an unknown place, and I'm looking forward to it.

“As you're probably aware, a school excursion is, as the words suggest, a trip for learning and acquiring knowledge. Unlike a typical high school, there are many rules that you are expected to follow.”

Chabashira-sensei gave a mild warning to the upbeat students not to confuse it with fun.

“You don't think there would be any special exams, do you...?”

There was no way to be certain, and it was understandable that Hondō would want to confirm this on behalf of the students. Hearing the question filled with fear and seeing the students' faces, Chabashira-sensei laughed a little.

“Rest assured, there will be no special exam to compete for class points.”

A sigh of relief escaped from the entire class at her clear statement.

“Before I get into the details, let me tell you about the schedule for the five-day, four-night trip.”

[School Trip Schedule:]

[Day 1]

Depart from school → Haneda Airport → Shin Chitose Airport → Arrival at ski resort, training → skiing → back to Ryokan

[Day 2]

Free all day

[Day 3]

Visit sightseeing spots in the city center of Futsatsu Horoporo → back to Ryokan

[Day 4]

*Free all day *Some conditions apply**

[Day 5]

Return

[TL Note: 旅館 Ryokan, is a traditional Japanese Inn]

The second day was a free day, as was the fourth, although apparently with some conditions.

“I was worried at first, but it's totally normal! No, it's better than normal! I can't wait for this trip!”

Apparently, almost all the students seemed to have a favorable impression of the normal school trip schedule, which seemed comparable to that of a typical school, and they became unusually excited about it.

Certainly, this school would usually have some sort of irregular schedule.

“It's fine to be excited, but have you already forgotten what I said? While you are promised freedom of movement, you guys have a few assignments to do as students of Advanced Nurturing High School.” She clarified there would be no special exams, so what exactly would be required of us then?

“If you know the enemy and know yourself, you will not be in danger in a hundred battles. That's the theme of this school trip.”

“What?”

Hondō tilted his head, unable to understand the famous quote from Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*.

“Understand the reality of the opponent you are fighting, and know your own strength. That way you'll be able to fight a battle you won't lose, that's what it means.”

Sudō, who explained the proverb before anyone else, broke it down into easily-comprehensible phrases.

“Oh, wow, you can understand all that?”

“It's not that amazing. It's just what the phrase means.”

I've come to like the fact that he doesn't show any conceit regarding his knowledge.

“Usually, on school trips, students form groups of several people. This is no different for you guys, but there is one obvious difference from other schools. That is, the formation of the groups is not completed only within the class, but from the entire school year.”

“Huh? Then, is it possible that there is a very high chance that we will be with someone we don't get along with?”

The students, who had been so excited about the new Hokkaido trip, were quickly brought back to reality.

As if to indicate this, Chabashira-sensei began to explain the details.

“That's right. Depending on your social circles and combinations of friends within the other classes, the majority of you may have to interact with new people.”

I don't personally have a wide range of friends in other classes. Depending on how many people are in the group, it could very well turn out as Chabashira-

sensei said.

“In a normal school, with a maximum of only 160 students in a school year, it’s likely that friendships would be more widespread. But the structure of this school hinders that.”

In a normal school, the number of friends should be greater because they all would have been studying in the same environment without any predetermined hostility. It isn’t hard to imagine now that the structure of this school makes that difficult.

“The most important thing for you is whether or not you graduate in Class A. This is accomplished through class competitions. This will continue even in the future. You are naturally going to be more aware of them as rivals than as friends.”

That environment is not supportive in forming wide-ranging friendships.

“Therefore, the opportunities to learn about the real lives of the students in the other classes and their personal situations are naturally limited.”

Certainly, we’ve learned a lot about our classmates over the past year and a half. However, many of us only have superficial knowledge of the situation in other classes.

If we show weakness, they may take advantage of it. In a completely different direction, there may be hesitation to defeat them.

I want my best friend from another class to graduate from Class A.

If such feelings arise, there could be significant hesitation in fighting. There may be many aspects of the world that we do not want to know.

“The purpose of this school trip is to remove those boundaries. It’s a great opportunity to get to know each other as students of this school and as a person, before being a student in another class.”

The five days and four nights may seem short, but it’s a long time. The more time you spend in a group during that period, the more likely you are to get closer.

On the other hand, there may be cases where the distance isn’t reduced at all. Even if the school removes obstacles, it won’t help if the students themselves build walls.

“There’s no way I’ll be able to enjoy the trip with these conditions, and I don’t feel like I’ll have fun at all!”

It was clear that there was no way to change the rules set by the school, but I saw several students like Ike who argued against them. Spending time with like-minded friends—I guess that’s one thing they don’t want to give up. Especially for Ike, who has only had a girlfriend for a short period of time, it was understandable that he was upset; he might not have the chance to form a group with Shinohara, depending on the details.

As the clamor and noise spread, one student got up from his seat to stop it, Yōsuke.

“I agree with the school's idea.”

Amidst all the opposition, he took the initiative and expressed his approval.

“That's great for you, Hirata. I'm sure there are a lot of guys in the other classes that you get along with, but even if you're proud of it, there's no need to rub it in.”

Indeed, Yōsuke's friendships are wide and diverse, and he seemed like he'd have little problem no matter who he was partnered with. However, there was no way that Yōsuke would say something like that to brag.

“That's not what I mean. Even I don't have anyone in the other classes who understands me better than my classmates. I don't think it's a good idea to think about it like that.”

First, Yōsuke insisted that he was essentially on the same side as Ike and the others.

“Then why are you in favor of it?”

“Because I felt it's important, I guess. Except for club activities and the like, this school obviously doesn't have a lot of chances that allow us to connect, and I felt that there were few opportunities to get to know students from other classes.”

That was also inevitable. Although there are some special exams in which students temporarily become allies, the competitive nature of the classes means that students tend to avoid getting too deeply involved, as Yōsuke mentioned.

For a kind-hearted person, it would be even more difficult to do so.

“Then wouldn't it be strange to get along? It's easier for rivals to stay as friends if they keep a reasonable distance from each other.”

“Hmm... but I consider others to be friends regardless of class.”

Opinions were divided among the girls as well. This was a matter of perspective.

“I think it comes down to whether the chicken or the egg comes first. Were they rivals before they became friends, or were they friends before they became rivals? I'm sure both of those are correct. As the teacher mentioned, the school trip is a good opportunity to learn that. There is more than one choice. The more choices, the more possibilities you have.”

“I kind of understand what you're saying, Hirata. Besides, even if we were to get worked up about it now, it doesn't mean that the school will change its rules, does it?”

If the school was willing to accommodate our complaints, then there would be a point in resisting. But we knew better.

“There's nothing wrong with getting heated in an argument, but let me continue talking first. I'm sure you guys will be more comfortable speaking after you hear the specifics of the process.”

With that, the tablet switched from the itinerary screen.

“It's been decided to group the students in each class as evenly as possible during the five-day, four-night school trip, with each group consisting of eight students. There will be a male and a female from each second-year class. However, as of today, the total number of second-year students is 156, which cannot be divided into groups of eight, so there will be 18 groups of eight and two groups of six. Gender ratios will also be adjusted to be as equal as possible.”

The four students who have been expelled from the school were evenly split, two males and two females, but the problem of different classes arose. The eight-person groups will be neatly divided, but the six-person groups will inevitably have some disparity between the classes. However, this was unavoidable.

Of course, this is assuming that there are no new withdrawals or absences due to illness or other reasons before the day of the school excursion.

“As for how you and your groups will be navigating around the area, this will be decided when we reach Hokkaido.”

The group rules were both displayed on the monitor and conveyed in words.

Situations Requiring Group Action:

When the school assigns it; on site.

Free activity

Situations Not Requiring Group Action:

In the accommodation facility (the ryokan)

We will depart from the school in separate class buses and go to Haneda Airport, before flying down to Shin-Chitose Airport. While in the airport, it seems we'll be divided into the determined groups.

From then on until the final bus ride back to the school, staying as a group will be the general rule.

There'll be a lot of travel by bus from the school to the airport and even after entering Hokkaido. It seems that nearly all our time, including bedtime, will be spent with those group members.

“Even in free activities, individuals are not allowed to do as they please. Group discussions are necessary, and group activities are absolute. If you cannot agree on a destination through discussion, you are not allowed to leave the ryokan.”

It's easy to concede when you're friendly with a specific person, but it can be tricky with others. If a group of insistent students gathers together, they won't be able to come to a consensus. As a result, there could be a situation where they can't go anywhere.

“Basically, you are free from group activities in the hotel. You may go to the public baths at any time you like, relax in the lobby, and eat at any time within the regulations.”

The only exception to group activities is the ryokan where the students stay. The rooms are shared by separate groups of men and women, but they are free to have breakfast and dinner, bathe, and otherwise explore the facilities on their own.

“We'll be staying at the same ryokan for all four nights, and it is a very well-known and respectable place to stay in the prefecture. I'm sure you'll never become bored and will have a comfortable stay.”

“Ugh, the ryokan may be the only place where you can have fun and relax.”

“Once again, this trip is a great opportunity to get to know the other classes' students in depth.”

After the explanation from Chabashira-sensei, Yōsuke seemed to have another question.

“If we're going to be in contact with a large number of people, isn't it a little strange being in the same group for the entire trip.”

“You made a good point, Hirata. We were also considering rotating the groups on a daily basis, but after consideration, it would not be difficult for some to only form superficial acquaintanceships. However, the situation would be very different in a four-night stay. If you can't show your true feelings to your group, you won't be able to enjoy your trip.”

If it's only for a day, many would be able to endure. Even if you don't like the group, you can be patient until the next day, when the group will be replaced. You will eventually form a group you are comfortable with.

“On the other hand, if you know that the group is fixed, you have to make it work. For those who have many friends in other classes, they may get along well no matter what group they are placed in. Meanwhile, those with few friends may suffer no matter what group they're placed in. But, you shouldn't look at it as a step backwards, but as a good opportunity.”

Of course, relationships aren't as simple as they sound. If you're the type of person who wants to make friends but can't, you may find it a positive experience; but for those who think they don't need friends, it will be a bit of an uncomfortable school trip.

Well, the latter group may find the very existence of the school trip itself depressing from the beginning.

“If it turns out that group behavior isn't being respected, there may be a

deprivation of freedom.”

Deprivation of freedom, if it were to happen, it would mean that more than half of the school trip would be meaningless.

In other words, adherence to group behavior is absolutely mandatory.

Most students are disciplined, but some aren't...

All the students' gazes turned at once to Kōenji.

“What is it, people? You've been giving me envious glances. I don't mind though.”

Kōenji, who wasn't listening to Chabashira-sensei, questioned them while sporting a fresh smile.

He's a man who can't read the air in many ways, but it's also true that he comes to school like this and keeps quiet. He may be more mature than expected in a school trip group...

Either way, the future is completely uncertain, and many students would prefer not to be with Kōenji if possible.

“Here's how we're going to divide you into groups, not randomly, but based on the table you made earlier.”

The task we took the time to complete prior to the teacher's explanation of the school excursion.

That seemed to have something to do with the groupings for the school trip.

“Also, your cell phones can be used during the school trip without any problem. However, the range of people you are allowed to call remains the same: calls to second-year students and current students, as well as to the police and emergency services in case of an urgent situation, while other calls to family members and people outside the school will continue to be prohibited. The school will also keep track of your outgoing calls, so please be careful.”

So this was going to be the theme of this school trip.

It's hard to believe that this was simply to make the students get along with each other. It could be seen as a milestone for the future of school life. The only major difference between this school trip and a normal one was the group formation throughout the entire school year.

The only other thing to inquire about was handling currency.

We only had private points, so we had no way to make purchases outside of school premises. Therefore, if we applied in advance, the school would provide us with cash in exchange for private points. Furthermore, if we run out of money on the actual trip, they will exchange up to 10,000 yen. After the school trip is over and the students return, they can exchange the remaining cash into private points again, so it would be better to exchange a larger amount of cash in the beginning.

3

At lunchtime, I went out with Kei, which had been my routine as of late. However, there were some guests this time, Yōsuke and Satō.

“It's kind of like a double date, isn't it, Ayanokōji-kun?”

Saying so, Satō, standing nearby, mumbled this.

“Hey, hey, hey, Maya-chan. That's not something you should be saying to Kiyotaka.”

The girls were walking around, talking to each other, however, I couldn't tell whether they were in a fight or on good terms.

“It's my first time going to Hokkaido. Have you ever been there, Kiyotaka?”

“No, I haven't.”

For me, who had been in the White Room, most of this was new territory for me. I had visited various places as part of the curriculum, but I had never been to Hokkaido. I only knew of Hokkaido as a cold region with a vast expanse of land, and the rest of the world I knew only through television and textbooks.

The main topic of conversation was the school excursion.

“I mean, are high school excursions really this lax? Isn't it too much freedom?”

“I was surprised too. I thought they would only give you an hour or two of free time a day.”

“I don't mind having a lot of free time. I think it's a lot better than having to stand around and listen to the museum guide and local people talk for a long time.”

Yōsuke laughed at this response, and Satō nodded her head in agreement.

As far as I was concerned... That kind of orthodox schedule wasn't so bad. The more freedom you have, the more it deviates from the original form of a school trip.

“I guess I'm a little concerned about the group aspect. I welcome trying to get along with other classes, but I can't help but feel that there's something beyond that.”

“Beyond getting along?”

Yōsuke nodded and looked at me as though seeking the answer.

“Since we're all competing to be Class A, feeling mercy is going to slow us down.”

“I guess that's what you're thinking, isn't it?”

It must be complicated for Yōsuke, who already felt strongly regarding it.

While he wants to get along with other classes, the downside of getting too close to them is also present.

“I'm a little scared. Someone in the other classes might need to graduate

from Class A at all costs, and the idea of finding out what's going on with them or getting too close is unsettling.”

“Hmm... I see. I think I kinda get what you're saying, Hirata. It's sympathy.”
Satō, too, was somewhat convinced after imagining it herself.

“I don't really think of it that way, though, because it's more important for me to get up to Class A... Am I cold?”

Kei flatly denied the sentiment.

It wasn't cold, but rather a perfectly honest and genuine feeling; one shared by a majority of the students.

“No one can see the true nature of people's feelings. But if I were to share my personal view, I would say that people are creatures who can easily show kindness on the surface, but only during that moment. And they don't want others to see that they harbor animosity.”

This love and loathing was very troubling.

“Suppose there's a student in another class who has to graduate from Class A, as Yōsuke said. If that student cannot be in Class A, he or she may later take their life.”

“What? That's a bit of an overstatement...”

“Of course it's an exaggeration. But it's also true that it's not completely impossible.”

No one knew where others' emotional limits lay, except for the people in question themselves.

“Suppose there's a class and they have over 20 million private points on hand. However, they must use those private points to protect their own class. They may be able to fight without them, but they are an important insurance policy. What if someone in our class, someone like Yōsuke, was in a situation where he wanted to save the students whose lives are on the line?”

“Eh... that's...”

“What if the class is in a situation where they say they are willing to save those students but are actually against it on the inside? I think there's a possibility that some students might show a facade of being willing to lend a hand on the surface.”

If you disagree, they will look at you with disdain, saying that you take other people's lives lightly.

In reality, I don't know what the people I'm with are thinking in their hearts.

“I've continued to exaggerate a bit, but knowing your enemy is not purely a merit.”

“Then why does the school try to make us get along...”

Kei's words stopped as she came to this point.

“Is there a reason for this that might be... related to special exams, for

example...?”

“I don't think we can deny that possibility.”

At least, with how we are now, most of us don't care who gets expelled from the other classes. The more of us that are gone, excluding those closest to us, the better off we are when reaching Class A.

“If that chart and the school trip are just one of the set pieces, then maybe the real event is the final exams at the end of the school year.”

“If that's the case, it could get nasty... I'm genuinely scared.”

“I agree. It's kind of a bad feeling.”

Both Yōsuke and Satō began to understand the anxiety regarding the future through our conversation.

At this stage, they had no idea if there would be any expulsions involved, but it seemed certain that it would be more difficult compared to last year.

4

After school, when the students' excitement for the school trip reached its peak, I was invited out by a certain person.

This person wanted to meet me on a bench near Keyaki Mall.

Kei had promised to hang out with Satō and some other girls at the dormitory today so there was no need to worry about her.

Of course, I could've ignored the message or asked them to reschedule, but the timing was convenient for me.

I was curious to know how they were doing, so it would be better to meet them. I replied that I would see them soon and decided to head to the appointed place.

Since I arrived 10 minutes earlier than scheduled, I decided to sit on a bench and wait. It was just after school and students were passing by the bench on their way to Keyaki Mall.

I was curious why they chose such a conspicuous place to meet. It could be that they were afraid that I would be wary and refuse to meet them, but this was out of character for them.

The fact that they went to the trouble of contacting me in advance was also at odds with their usual behavior. Was it simply a psychological issue, or was there another force at work?

For a while after that, I watched the crowd of students heading to Keyaki Mall.

The appointed time arrived, but the person didn't seem to have arrived yet. I decided to continue surfing the web without worrying about it too much.

“Hey~!”

As I was killing time on my cell phone, I heard a girl's voice from a distance, directed at me. I looked up and found that it was the person who sent me the message, Amasawa Ichika.

Nanase, who was in another class, was also with her.

In contrast to the smiling Amasawa, Nanase seemed slightly surprised. Waving her hand as she approached, she stopped a few dozen centimeters in front of me.

“Sorry to keep you waiting!”

“I see Nanase is with you.”

I couldn't ignore her since she was right in front of me, so I mentioned it as a formality.

“Yes. Please forgive me for being present without informing you.”

“No, there's no need to apologize. It was a bit unexpected, though.”

I had assumed that today's call would be a one-on-one discussion with Amasawa. That assumption was soon answered by Amasawa's words.

“The reason I was late was because Nanase-chan stopped me.”

Saying this, she pointed her finger at Nanase as the one responsible.

“And she also asked to come along with me. Did you really want to see Ayanokōji-senpai that badly?”

“Oh, is that so?”

“Ah, no...”

Nanase was a bit flustered, but quickly corrected Amasawa's words.

“I was curious about what Amasawa-san was doing, so I followed her, but I didn't know that she was meeting up with Ayanokōji-senpai here.”

“Eh~? Didn't I tell you? I thought I did.”

“Only after we had already approached him.”

“Oh ho, you may be right.”

So that was why she was so flustered when her eyes met mine.

I listened as the two first-year students explained the situation.

I guess Nanase had her own reasons for being here, seeing as how she didn't simply walk away. I put Nanase aside for the moment and turned my attention to Amasawa.

“I heard you were absent from school for a while?”

“You know very well, don't you? I'm sure you were curious about me after all, so you looked into me? If it's Ayanokōji-senpai, you're welcome to stalk me.”

Amasawa hadn't been seen at school since the end of the festival and the holidays.

I doubt it was because she was sick.

“I was the one who reported it to Ayanokōji-senpai.”

“Huh~, so that means Nanase-chan is my stalker!” Amasawa deliberately overreacted and raised both hands.

“A girl, huh? Well, this is the age of diversity, right? And Nanase-chan is cute and adorable, right? Maybe it's possible.”

“Please don't twist reality in your favor.”

Nanase calmly told Amasawa, who was in high tension.

“That's exactly why I approached Amasawa-san today. She had been absent from school ever since Yagami-kun was expelled. It was obvious that it wasn't a physical issue, but a mental one. It's natural to distrust her when she suddenly returns to school.”

It's only normal to keep a close eye on the movements of White Room students who have suddenly resumed attending school.

Yagami Takuya. I considered the possibilities and there is no doubt that he was from the same generation as Amasawa.

As fellow students, it wasn't difficult to imagine that Amasawa had strong feelings for her ally, Yagami.

"When I found out that you were going to meet Ayanokōji-senpai here, I couldn't turn away," she said.

"You sound like a knight protecting her senpai."

"It's not anything that great, but I judged that, with your current state of mind, Amasawa-san, I don't know what you'll do."

It may seem like a coincidental sequence of events, but Nanase must've been making her own speculations. It was hard to imagine Amasawa coming to school solely to attend classes after a vacation.

"So that's how it is."

Amasawa was trying to act cheerful up to this point, but I still didn't sense her usual energy.

"It's a little disturbing, but I thought it was okay."

"If you're still in school, that means you've given your own answer, right?"

When I asked this, Amasawa's smile quietly receded.

It seems that this wasn't the case, as I could see something wavering in her eyes.

"Why didn't you instruct them to take me with Yagami? You could've expelled me along with him if you wanted."

"You were prioritizing your own enjoyment of this school over expelling me, at least that's how I perceived it. I didn't see the need to have you expelled."

No, it was initially the same with Yagami as well. Although we never found a chance to discuss it directly, if he had prioritized remaining in school, there would've been no need to expel him.

"I haven't given you an answer yet. I'm sure there's no place for me even if I go back anyway... It's just that the time passed while I was thinking about that."

After saying this, she smiled to herself.

In other words, she hadn't decided whether she was going to stay or move on... Or turn on me.

"But you've still found some kind of direction. That's why you called me here, isn't it?"

"Well, yes. I'm starting to think that if I have the option to stay, I might as well. I can't go back to the White Room, and even if I leave, I don't know where my parents are. I don't want to be forced to find a part-time job in order to live."

If you're on the streets, you have to do whatever it takes to stay alive. However, as long as you stay in this school and don't drop out, you're guaranteed to live until graduation. Moreover, the school will eventually buy back your private points.

Even though it won't be an equivalent exchange, even half the monetary

value would provide substantial capital. It would be possible to use it and find a legitimate job down the road.

There was a third option. Amasawa didn't seem to be considering it, but in fact, there was the possibility of finding her parents and returning to them.

However, if she was formally declared a dropout from the White Room, there was no guarantee regarding how she would be treated.

In other words, whether or not that option is available would be contingent on Amasawa's parents. Firstly, they must be wealthy, famous, or otherwise powerful. If the White Room knows that the child is famous, they're more likely to treat the child with respect. And secondly, the parents must be in need of a daughter and willing to accept her.

If these two conditions were met, there may be an opportunity to start a normal life.

Still, there was no need to force that option now.

Amasawa, perhaps bothered by our silence, stated in a subdued voice, "I've been thinking about this school for a long time. I've decided to stay. As long as Ayanokōji-senpai doesn't mind..."

"What if I ask you to leave?"

"I'll drop out."

Would she cling to me, get angry, or even be saddened?

I wondered how she would react, but Amasawa immediately replied as such.

"You have no hesitation. Don't you want to get revenge for Yagami?"

"I don't want to cause you any more trouble."

That's how prepared she was to come to this place, in her own way.

"Those words don't suit the belligerent Amasawa-san."

"That's correct. Only Ayanokōji-senpai gets this kind of special treatment. Other than you, I won't go lightly on any others in the future."

This must've been her sincere intention. Amasawa seemed to value Yagami very highly as a member of the same White Room generation. It was quite possible that anyone involved in Yagami's expulsion would become Amasawa's target in the future.

"There's no reason for me to stop you. If you want to stay, you can do whatever you want."

I don't know how much encouragement it would provide her, but she happily relaxed her cheeks a little.

"My ability isn't close to that of my senpai, so I'm not even considered a threat?"

"That's not what I meant. I'm one of the people who chose to remain at this school, and it's natural for me to want to support you if you make the same choice."

Whether we were allies or enemies was a trivial matter. Of course, I won't let her be if she interferes with my plans. I would like to think that she understood that very well from Yagami's case.

"...I see."

"If that's what you truly believe, Amasawa-san, then I'll support you as well."

Nanase's expression seemed to suggest that she had yet to completely lower her guard.

"Hey, something's making my eyes water... This, what's this... This is the first time I've ever felt this way."

"No, no, there aren't any tears at all, no matter how I look at it."

"Haha. I'm so moved by all this anyways."

She acted the same as always, but it seemed like a means to force herself to be inspired.

"You may not want to be asked this, but what kind of person was Yagami?"

"I'm curious too. I don't even know why he kept going around causing unnecessary trouble before trying to expel Ayanokōji-senpai."

Why did he hurt Shinohara and her group even though he knew it was risky? Why did he expel an unrelated 1st year Class C student?

The school also announced the incident as Yagami's misconduct, and many people became aware of it. Even someone like Nanase, she must still have many things to worry about.

"I guess..."

She pretended to think for a moment but soon began talking.

"I think he was scared. Yagami was afraid of fighting Ayanokōji-senpai. But I'm sure he kept those feelings of fear so deep in his heart that he was unaware of them."

This was Amasawa's analysis, who knew Yagami better than anyone else. I didn't need to gouge her to ask for more details. I'm sure that was the right conclusion.

"In order to escape his fear, he strayed far from his goal without even realizing it..."

This ultimately resulted in him digging his own grave.

"It may take a little more time for me to get back to my normal self. But I'm sure I'll be... Fine again soon."

There was no need to rush anyways. It hasn't even been a year since Amasawa started school. From now on, she should take her time and consider the path she should take.

"I just wanted to tell you that. Well, I'm going home for today. What about you, Nanase? Do you want to go home with me?"

Nanase shook her head in response to the invitation.

“I'm sorry, but I'm going to talk with senpai for a bit. That's fine, right?”

“I see. Then I'll let you borrow him for today.”

I'm not hers, but this was simply her putting on a brave face.

Amasawa walked toward the dormitory without trying to stay for too long.

Nanase and I watched her in silence until she was out of sight, Nanase's profile remaining stern.

“What did you think of her remarks, attitude, and gestures?”

“What do you mean?”

“I'm still a little worried about whether or not there'll be any problems with Amasawa-san's behavior in the future.”

It seemed that the reason she wanted to continue talking was because she was concerned about this.

“You don't trust her?”

“It's not that I don't want to trust Amasawa-san. But I still think we can't let our guard down.”

She was showing a mild expression, but there was no doubt that she didn't trust her.

“I won't let my guard down. I'm just going to act the same as usual.”

The reason I was at this school was to live my life as a student. I wasn't going to be swayed by adversaries, near or far.

“Then... It's unnecessary for me to...”

“I appreciate the sentiment. There's nothing better than having even one more ally on your side.”

Nanase continued, though she seemed to be satisfied with my way of thinking to some extent.

“Once again, at the risk of sounding persistent—Ayanokōji-senpai's ability, and the possibility of Amasawa-san's conversion—while understanding those things, please still be careful. It's an undeniable fact that Amasawa-san's a student of the White Room. We don't know what tactics she'll use.”

It was a strong request from Nanase to be prepared for any possibility.

“I want Ayanokōji-senpai to remain at this school and graduate.”

I won't say it's irrelevant, but Nanase seemed to be more concerned about me than I was myself.

“If you have any trouble, no matter how trivial, please consult me anytime.”

“I understand what you mean. I'll keep it in mind.”

Nanase must've finally been satisfied after this exchange.

“Well then, I'm finished here.”

Perhaps thinking that she would be a nuisance, Nanase turned away and headed back to the dormitory.

I was repeatedly told to be on guard against Amasawa, but there was one thing that caught my attention. I decided to push a little further to confirm it.

“I forgot to mention that we're going on a school trip this week.”

“Oh, that's right. Senpai, please enjoy yourself to the fullest. School trips are the best part of school life, you know.”

“That's the plan.”

I still felt uncomfortable. Whether she knew about the school trip or not, there was something she should've said to me. But Nanase didn't even show a pretense of it in this situation.

It was as if she had completely forgotten about it.

“Is there anything you want as a souvenir?”

I stopped Nanase and dug deeper into the school trip.

“Speaking of which, where are you going?”

“Hokkaido.”

“Oh, that sounds great, Hokkaido. Mhh... maybe butter?”

“I don't think butter by itself would be a good souvenir.”

If that's what she wanted most, I wouldn't refuse, but it didn't seem to be the case.

“Oh, then I'd like a chocolate-coated potato. They're famous, aren't they?”

“I'm not sure...”

The conversation seemed to be a bit of strange for both of us.

“Chocolate potatoes, I'll look into it later. If I find them over there, I'll buy them.”

“Thanks.”

Nanase was about to leave again, but I stopped her, my tone firm.

“Nanase, can I ask you something?”

“Yes? What is it?”

The matter of Amasawa and the school trip. Even if ordinary students couldn't determine a connection between the two, Nanase could. No, it would be strange if she couldn't.

“The first thing that comes to mind is the fact that we've been talking about Amasawa and the school trip for so long.”

“What...?”

Nanase tilted her head, as if to say she still didn't understand.

“You still don't understand? Think about it.”

I urged her to ponder this issue, and immediately after saying this, Nanase's soft smile hardened for a moment.

“This school has strict security and is a facility that's protected from the outside world 24 hours a day. In fact, Tsukishiro had to get inside himself to try to expel me from the school. However, when it comes to school trips, the story is

very different. Teachers are out of sight, and there's a greater need to be vigilant than on a deserted island."

Yes, the risk should be higher than Amasawa, who had been defanged.

"If you're familiar with those guys, you can imagine that they can even use aggressive methods like forcing me into their car. If you're so wary of Amasawa, they would be plenty more dangerous. Shouldn't a 'Please be careful,' be in order? Am I wrong?"

She was checking on Amasawa since she came to school, not knowing what kind of action she would take. And when she made contact, Nanase even showed up here to intervene. There was no way that such a meticulous Nanase wouldn't have sensed the danger of the school trip.

"I can't believe I'm the one worried about Ayanokōji-senpai, the one who eliminated Yagami-kun and Amasawa-san..."

"That's strange. If that were the case, there would be no need for you to stand by Amasawa's side here today. Besides, it contradicts your persistent warnings. Unlike outside, where many adults may come in large numbers, Amasawa is alone. Even though she's a White Room student, in terms of danger, she's insignificant."

Nanase was perplexed, but she immediately opened her mouth... However, no words came out.

"Can't you think of an excuse?"

"What are you talking about? You seem to have misunderstood something."

It could be seen that she was obviously upset just before this, but Nanase was calm now.

"Maybe it's a misunderstanding. Then tell me again your view on the school trip. You were worried about Amasawa, who might be getting desperate, and kept an eye on her, so why didn't you say anything about your concerns regarding the school trip?"

"I'm ashamed to say this, but I think I was naive in regards to identifying the danger. If you think about it, as Ayanokōji-senpai said, the outside world is full of danger..."

Nanase responded by suggesting that it was simply a lack of awareness. Certainly, if that was really the case, then it was hard to blame her for thinking this way.

But I couldn't believe that so easily.

"I've been curious about something ever since I met you. I thought about the relationship between Tsukishiro, the White Room students, and you. You must've been given a lot of instructions by Tsukishiro, but why hadn't you told me anything concrete regarding his plans?"

Tsubasa Nanase had her feelings exploited by Tsukishiro in order to avenge

the death of Matsuo Eiichirou.

On the other hand, Tsukishiro never revealed the identity of the White Room students to Nanase.

“I guess it’s because I’m an ordinary person... It's no wonder they don't trust me since I don't have the same abilities as the White Room students.”

“I didn't set my opinion of Tsukishiro so highly at first. That's because I thought there were more efficient ways for him to force me to leave the school. But, as I got to know him, I changed my mind. I thought he could have driven me out of school through other methods.”

There were so many opportunities that I thought he was holding back on purpose.

“As a result, you weren't expelled. Isn't that because Ayanokōji-senpai's ability exceeded that of former Acting Director Tsukishiro?”

“That may be true. If it were only that simple.”

In other words, this sequence of events may not be so simply structured.

“Going back a bit, I believe there’s another reason why you were wary of Amasawa and didn’t warn me of the dangers of the outside world.”

“My lack of awareness is the truth. What else do you think?”

“It's because you couldn't guess what Amasawa would do as of today, right? And you didn't warn me of the danger of the school trip because you knew the White Room had no intention to do anything?”

If it was already predetermined that no trap would be set, it was no wonder Nanase wasn't worried.

“I’m not sure. How can you say I knew that there was no chance of a trap?”

“That's what I'd like to know.”

“After hearing your story, I've become very aware of the risks regarding the school trip. Now I would like to ask you to be more vigilant regarding this rather than Amasawa-san.”

Even though we continued this back-and-forth for a while, Nanase consistently showed her lack of worrying due to her negligence.

“This is just a theory, but would you listen to it?”

“Of course.”

“Tsukishiro had no intention of expelling me from school from the very beginning - that's my hypothesis.”

This hypothesis suggested various correlations, even though it overturned the assumptions made up to this point.

“Isn't that strange? How do you explain the existence of Amasawa-san and Yagami-kun? Yagami-kun was specifically working to get Ayanokōji-senpai expelled from the school, and that's only what we know from his conversation with Amasawa-san.”

“If Amasawa and Yagami were seriously trying to expel me because they were not informed of their true purpose by their superiors, then it makes sense.”

“But what about Acting Director Tsukishiro? He was using his influential position to employ a number of forceful methods.”

“If he was serious, I would’ve been expelled.”

Before it became a matter of ability, he would’ve forcibly buried me through numerous other options.

“I understand what you’re thinking, senpai. Perhaps such an intention was really concealed within. But it’s a little disconcerting that I am involved in that series of events. I don’t want to be considered an enemy simply because I overlooked the dangers of the school trip.”

“Then, while we’re at it, what about the cultural festival? The people involved with the White Room were nearby, but you didn’t even show up in front of me. Is this another one of your lapses in perception?”

“That’s...”

“Were you simply too busy with your own class project that your concerns became secondary?”

“No, no. Well, of course I was worried. I also occasionally watched over you...”

“Is that right? Are you sure you want to say you were watching over me? If you say that, I’ll have to ask you when and where you were watching me.”

Whatever Nanase’s position was, I’m sure she understood me well enough.

If she were to utter a false statement, it would inevitably be exposed. I still remember every detail of the day of the festival.

“At the festival, they didn’t try to force me to leave the school, but they urged me to do so voluntarily. That’s why you didn’t show up.”

Nanase gulped quietly, suppressing her emotions.

“The White Room’s people had no intention of expelling me during the cultural festival or the school trip. No, there was no such plan from the beginning. If this hypothesis is correct, your existence appears extremely strange, Nanase.”

“...”

“Did Matsuo really commit suicide? And did his son, Eiichiro, die? Your statement, which I thought was coming from a third party, gave more credibility to Matsuo’s death—but if you’re here with your mind made up from the beginning, then all credibility is lost.”

What she said on the deserted island, where she stood as an enemy and then switched sides, lost its reliability.

“It’s all true, Ayanokōji-senpai. But I’m sure that even if you prefaced it with the fact that it’s a hypothesis, I’m sure I won’t be able to clear your doubts.”

The only way to find out whether this was true or not was to investigate it

through a family register, for example. Of course, if the White Room was involved, even that would be suspect.

“Under that hypothesis, what’s the reason for my coming to this school? It doesn't explain it.”

“No, it can be explained. It’s consistent with the idea that you are an aid to me. You’re to support me while also keeping watch over me. The fact that you had one altercation with me over Matsuo can be considered as a way to get me to let my guard down.”

Those who fought as enemies and turned to allies. Depending on the time and circumstances, trust can be built in a short period of time.

“This is exactly what Amasawa said about being given the role of a knight...”

They gave Nanase the role of pretending to be an enemy, to gauge my capabilities, before assigning her the role of being an ally.

In that role, by intentionally withholding information from the White Room students, she would be able to make serious deductions and offer me genuine help.

“It's just a theory. There’s still a possibility that they’re actually serious about getting me expelled from the school. Besides, I have nothing to lose either way. If this hypothesis is correct, you’re a genuine ally, and even if it isn’t, you’ll still be an ally.”

The concept behind two sides of a coin doesn’t apply here; both sides have the same picture. But let's keep it in the back of our minds. The possibility that she may not be working to get me expelled.

Then what for?

At what point did she start?

Matsuo's life or death, his son's life or death. Whether this was true or false, it didn't affect the situation very much. If everything that has happened up to this point had been turned upside down, then I would like to...

I'm not sure if it was all a foregone conclusion that I would be enrolled in this school.

“No matter what I say here, it’s unlikely that Ayanokōji-senpai will accept it. The only way is to clear myself of doubts over time.”

“I don't know if there’s a way to clear my doubts, but that's the way it's going to be. I'd rather you treat me the same way you've always treated me.”

“Please wait. I'm not satisfied with... That way.” Nanase quickly bowed her head and briskly made her way home.

Nanase was not as physically gifted as the White Room students. The extent of her academic ability wasn't clear, but even when it came to her intuition, she was currently a step behind Amasawa and the others.

However... Tsubasa Nanase still had something to offer. I had a feeling that there was something more to her.

5

It was past 7:00 p.m. and the sun was setting when Sudō visited me in my room.

“Sorry for suddenly showing up without calling.” Sudō muttered to himself as he caught the smell of supper that drifted to the doorway.

Sudō suddenly glanced at the two pairs of shoes lined up in the entryway.

“Is someone here?”

“Yeah, I was just getting ready to have curry with Kei.”

As soon as she heard this, Kei, in plain clothes, opened the door leading to the living room and came out.

“Is it bad that I'm here?”

“No, no, it's not that bad. I'm just wondering if you guys are always together?”

I could tell from his reaction that he thought no one was home when he came to visit me.

“Of course we're always together. We're a couple.”

“I can't help but think of couples being together 24/7.”

Sudō tried to refute this, but he admitted with a look of dismay that he had imagined several couples in his immediate surroundings. Ike and Shinohara have been doing some pretty remarkable things lately, holding hands and sitting on her boyfriend's lap without being afraid to be seen.

Today, too, I think she said she was going to karaoke with him as soon as they left from school.

“Looks like you were on your way home from club activities.”

I get the impression that he usually comes home around this time.

“Because I don't even have a girlfriend and all I have is basketball.”

That's... An answer I'm not sure how to respond to.

“Sorry to interrupt your dinner, but can I talk to you for a minute? I won't take up much of your time.”

The fact that he had checked for shoes early on made me wonder if this was some kind of confidential conversation.

“Go ahead and eat first.”

I told Kei to eat until I came back.

“Eh~? I'll wait. You'll be done soon, right? You said you won't take up too much of our time.”

Sudō thought for a moment, but when he told her it wouldn't take any more than five minutes, she was satisfied and closed the door. I put on my shoes and went out into the hallway with Sudō.

I couldn't imagine Kei leaking anything to a third party, but this would make Sudō feel assured.

“So have you and Karuizawa done any of the intimate things the couples do?”

He would ask such things with vague expressions.

“I'll leave that to your imagination.”

“Uh, it's like you're already giving the answer indirectly.”

It's up to the recipient to decide how to take it.

“So? What do you want?”

“Oh yeah, you do seem to be having a lot of fun these days. Anyway, I don't have time to worry about it.”

Shaking his head to dispel any evil thoughts, Sudō checked his surroundings.

“Actually, lately, Onodera has been asking to play and I don't know what to do?”

He spoke not with a happy look, but... with a puzzled one. When a friend comes to you to talk about such things, it is best to advise them sincerely. That's why, as the person responsible for that, I had to listen to this kind of talk seriously. Nevertheless, we should correct what needs to be corrected.

“You say Onodera's showing interest in you? But she doesn't seem to have changed much since the sports festival as far as I can tell. Perhaps she feels that way because her view of you has changed.”

For Onodera, she doesn't think for a second that Sudō realizes that she has feelings for him. On the surface, it should be nothing more than a normal invitation for dinner between friends.

“That may be the case.” He scratched his head and looked restless.

The first thing that came to mind was the fact that the two of us have been talking about Onodera for a while now, but I keep wondering what he really thinks of her.

For Sudō, he must've simply seen her as a good friend with whom he was on the same wavelength and also an athlete like him. It would be understandable for him to change if he knew that Onodera might have taken a liking to him. At this point, Sudō stopped speaking. Then there was a ten-second silence.

“So? What is it that you want to tell me? I think there's more to it.”

When I prompted him to do so, Sudō, as if he had made up his mind, began to speak again.

“When I'm with Onodera like that... I start to have weird feelings inside me. I don't know if I'm being objective right now, but Onodera is cute enough.”

On top of that, she and Sudō have a lot to talk about. Both are athletes. If one considers compatibility alone, it seems like the best pairing in their immediate

surroundings.

“There's nothing wrong with thinking that. In the first place, our fondness for the opposite sex typically manifests through appearance first. It should often be a two-way street.”

That said, some of us can't take it in stride, though. Sudō here is also struggling with it.

“Hmm... Maybe. But your assessment itself may be wrong to begin with, and she may only think of me as a friend, right? If that's the case, there's nothing more embarrassing than this pride, and it's messing with my head.”

It's almost certain that Onodera has feelings for Sudō. But there's certainly no guarantee that it is what he thinks it is. The arrow that was pointed at him yesterday could be pointed at someone else tomorrow.

“You've had a lot of trouble too, haven't you? You're dating Kei, but she was dating Hirata at one point, right?”

“Well, yes.”

The reality was completely different, but for the time being, I'll just leave it at that.

“If Onodera confesses to me, that's what I'm afraid of.”

“What are you going to do if she confesses to you now?”

“No, no, no... Maybe I'll never get that confession.”

“Maybe this will be an opportunity to be happy with her.”

“I guess I really like her... But I also like Suzune.” That is one of the uncertainties Sudō has at the moment.

“But if I imagine hurting Onodera's feelings with my rejection, it leaves a bitter taste in my mouth.”

“So you're saying you came here because you didn't know what path to take.”

“No... I'm not here to be given advice. This is about how I feel, and if I look to anyone for answers, I'm doing the wrong thing.”

I don't think he came here to ask for help.

“I've come up with one answer in my own way. I just wanted you to hear it.”

“Let me ask you. What kind of answer did you come up with?”

“I-I'm going to officially confess to Suzune on the school trip. I'm serious, I want to say, ‘please go out with me.’”

I see. I guess he's not talking about whether or not he has a chance now. He decided that the only way out of this situation was to make his move.

“I like Suzune, and I can't think of going out with anyone else right now. Whatever the outcome, I want to make it clear.”

Up to this point, Sudō had been showing rapid growth. No doubt Horikita herself appreciated this.

“The probability may be low. It might even be embarrassing. Still...”

Sudō thought that if he didn't convey his feelings, he wouldn't be able to move forward. That's probably why he expressed his determination.

“I don't think that simply due to being rejected, I'm just going to go to Onodera. In fact, it might even make me feel more strongly towards her that I won't give up...”

Saying this, Sudō clenched his fists.

“The reason I came to you today is because I want you to witness my determination.”

“Witness? Don't tell me you want me to watch it?”

“I know a confession isn't something you normally show to others, but maybe I need it.”

Maybe it's the push he needed to give himself courage, to muster up the strength to do it. By sealing his path of retreat, he would be able to speak his mind about his feelings for Horikita.

“I'm going to offer you my hand, and ask you to watch over me...”

Saying this, he offered his own right hand as a preliminary gesture. Even though he wasn't actually confessing yet, it was clear that his heart was already full of heat.

In front of Horikita, he'll put all of those feelings into words and smash them. At this stage, the odds of her accepting weren't very high. Perhaps the strength, enthusiasm, and determination that shape him are driving him to these lengths. Horikita may not immediately approve of becoming lovers. Even so, it's conceivable that she would respond in agreement of starting off as friends.

“I understand. It depends on the time and place, but I'll watch over you as long as I can. Is that okay?”

When I said this, Sudō seemed relieved and patted his chest in relief.

“Oh, I'm sorry for asking you to do this. Well, that's why I contacted you... I'm sorry for interrupting your time with Karuizawa.”

Not wanting to let himself waste any more of my time, Sudō went to his room.

After seeing him off, I returned to my room and found Kei sitting on a cushion in front of the table.

She was waiting for me without any curry on the table.

“Welcome back. What did you talk about?”

“Various things.”

“Various things? I'm curious. But... I won't pry.”

“I'll tell you, but first, stand up for a second.”

“What?”

I made Kei stand, while she tilted her head curiously, and touched the

surface of the cushion with my hand.

Then I felt a cool sensation.

“I knew you were listening.”

“How did you know?”

If she had been sitting and waiting, the cushion would have been warm.

“Was it because I was a poor actor?”

“Your acting was perfect. I just knew you would be listening.”

“I see.”

“Also, if you're going to fool around, you should at least avoid drawing attention to the cushions. I'm sure you could've claimed you've been to the fridge to get a drink right up until now. There's milk and tea in there besides water.”

“Yeah? But wouldn't it be strange to drink them when we haven't even had curry yet? There's a glass of water in there, too. I'm sure you would go check the fridge to see how much there is left to drink or something, though.”

“If you're going to eavesdrop without getting caught, you need to do at least that much. Drinking water is the solution, and if you don't want to drink it yourself, you can pour it down the kitchen drain. The sink is already wet because of the cooking process.”

Even if you pour it down the drain, it's impossible to tell the difference. If the kitchen sink wasn't soaking wet, she could have used the toilet.

“Well, that's not important. Look, let's talk about the school trip.” Kei said as she leaned forward, seeking to escape the topic.

There was no point in continuing with the current topic, so I decided to go along with her.

“What did you think of the school trip itinerary? I know there was a lot of talk in class about how there's a lot of free time.”

“It seems so. But for me, I think it's a disadvantage. I'm only allowed to spend time with people from my group, right? The chance of being with you seems low, right?”

The probability is about 5%. However, this is only if it's determined purely by probability alone.

“Oh God, please let us be together!” Kei crossed her fingers with both hands and prayed to the heavens.

“Even if we can't be together for free activities, there aren't restrictions during our stay at the inn. In fact, as far as I'm concerned, I consider it a great opportunity to get to know the students of other classes better.”

If I was in a group with Kei, I'd probably be with her throughout the entire day. I'm not saying that's a bad thing, but it seems a bit wasteful.

As for spending time together, there'll be plenty of opportunities to do so, as we were doing here.

“You don't seem to want to be in the same group as me?”

“That's not true. It's just that you should make yourself comfortable so that you can enjoy yourself even if we can't be in the same group.”

Kei might comprehend this in her head, but she can't seem to accept it honestly.

“Ah mou...” Her cheeks puffed out as if she was sulking, and she hugged my shoulder.

“If I'm not with you, I'll die of loneliness.”

“That's an exaggeration.”

“But, but...”

I may have to be a little creative here to get Kei motivated.

“There's a reason I think it's okay for us to be in separate groups. We're getting to the point where we need information on each class in order to move up to Class A. There will be a lot of students who will be unprotected on the school trip, too.” To Kei's frustration, I continued. “When I heard about the school trip schedule and groups, I did some research on the Internet about other schools. I found out that it is quite rare for a school to have almost two full days of free time. From this, I thought that the school's goal was to cause a change in the relationship with the other classes while we're there.”

“For what reason?”

“That remains to be seen, but it could be for something at the end of the second semester or the end of the third. Anyway, in the near future, the information from the school trip could come into play.”

“So you want me to gather information that could be used as a weapon?”

“You've got a remarkable ability, you know. I'd like to make the most of it.”

I said this while patting her head. Her dissatisfaction wasn't completely gone, but it changed to a not-so-satisfied look.

“Well... I can understand why you would want to rely on me...”

“Of course, I'm going to have fun if we're in a group together. But even if that doesn't happen, don't lose motivation to have fun while also being useful to the class at the same time.”

“Yes... but I'm not sure how much I'm going to be able to accomplish.”

Repeatedly patting her head, I decided to change the subject.

“About what Sudō said earlier...”

“Oh, you're talking about Sudō-kun wanting to confess to Horikita-san, right? Yeah, that might be of some interest.”

I wasn't sure she'd bite, but she seemed to care more than I thought.

“Girls seem to like hearing about other people's confessions, don't they?”

“That's right. Well, I'm pretty sure he'll get turned down.”

“Really?”

“Eh? You think he has a chance?”

“I feel like it's possible. If we treat it as them becoming a little more than friends, I'm betting on success.”

“Oh really? Then make a bet with me. You can bet on success and I'll bet on failure.”

“What will the stakes be?”

“Hmmm... If I win, I want an expensive Christmas present.”

Saying that, she already started to fantasize about all kinds of things.

“That's easy to understand. What if I win?”

“Then I'll do whatever you say.”

“Are you sure you want to make such a big bet?”

“Because it's absolutely impossible. It's not about whether Sudō-kun is good or bad, it's about Horikita-san. I don't think she's interested in love.”

“I don't know.”

Indeed, at first glance, there's no indication that Horikita is interested in love.

And if you were to ask her if she likes someone in particular at this point in her life, there would most likely be no one. However, it would be hard to say that a confession wouldn't be successful just because she isn't interested in the other person. Horikita is also at the stage where she's learning a lot right now.

We cannot deny the possibility that she'll take a step up to that stage, just as I did. If the other party is Sudō, Horikita will already have an impression of him.

“Oh~ I'm looking forward to Christmas~. What should I have you buy me?”

“Then I'll take my time and think about what I'm going to have you do for me.”

“Wow, that sounds a little creepy!”

That was just Kei's imagination.

Chapter 2:

A School Trip that Works Exactly as it Sounds

ON THE MORNING of the day of the school trip a total of four buses gathered, and all the second-year students lined up wearing plain clothes.

The temperature was below 5 degrees Celsius this morning, and the cold wind occasionally stung my skin.

However, the temperature will get even lower on the way to Hokkaido.

The school had the students carefully check to make sure they hadn't forgotten gloves, coats, or other items. A final check of luggage, including clothing and essentials such as cell phones, was completed.

The students were all relieved that they would be going on the school trip without encountering any ill students.

The homeroom teacher for the 2nd year Class A, Mashima-sensei, gave a speech before boarding the bus.

The 2nd year homeroom teachers each boarded one of the four buses: Mashima-sensei boarded No. 1, Chabashira-sensei No. 2, Sakagami-sensei No. 3, and Hoshinomiya-sensei No. 4.

In short, it was by class order, A to D.

While waiting to board the bus, I checked the schedule on my cell phone.

The bus will take us to Haneda Airport, where we'll fly down to Shin-Chitose Airport.

Then we'll board the local buses and head to the ski resort for the first day.

I quietly browsed through the list of groups.

The names of the eight members assigned to group number six, which included me, were displayed.

From Class A, there were Kitō Hayato and Yamamura Miki, from Class B, myself and Kushida Kikyō, from Class C, Ryūen Kakeru and Nishino Takeko, and lastly, from Class D were Watanabe Norihito and Amikura Mako.

I had no complaints about the grouping chosen by the school, but I was surprised to be in the same group as Ryūen, who was perceived as the most troublesome by many students.

As for Kitō, Yamamura, Watanabe, Nishino, and Amikura, I didn't know much about them since I hardly interacted with them at all, but I'm sure I'll learn more about them as we continue on with the trip.

The groupings were interesting, with it being hard to determine if they were strong relationships or weak ones.

For the record, I gave each student the following numbers: Kushida, 6; Watanabe, 18; Amikura, 14; Ryūen, 6; Nishino, 18; Kitō, 9; and Yamamura, 14. The rankings were based mainly on the OAA derived by the school, regardless of personal familiarity.

Of these, the highest ratings went to Kushida and Ryūen.

However, the other students may not necessarily give the same ranking as I did.

Especially for Ryūen, as there were many students who disliked him, and it wouldn't be surprising if he was given an extremely low number. Would Kitō in particular, who supported Sakayanagi, give Ryūen a high number?

No, that, too, could only be assumed in the end.

It wouldn't be contradictory to give Ryūen a higher number since he has both the characteristics and qualities of a leader.

We know from the class numbering task the other day that it wasn't completely random, but no matter how much we guess, we may not be able to find the pattern at this point.

I'm not even sure if five out of the seven of us could figure it out.

I don't know if I could include Ryūen as someone who would try to help figure it out.

I've been trying to expand my friend circle in my own way this past year and a half, but it wasn't so easy when it comes to other classes.

Now, it seems that the time to board is approaching.

The students began to gather around their close friends.

The bus we were about to board didn't have designated seats. A year ago, I would've personally appreciated having a predetermined seat.

Now that Kei's my girlfriend, it's easier to know who'll inevitably sit next to whom.

As if by mutual agreement, Kei waved her hand and stood next to me.

However, at about the same time as Kei, Yōsuke showed up.

“Kiyotaka-kun, may I have a word with you? About your seat on the bus, do you mind if I sit next to you until the airport?”

Next to me? Why again?

Because of Kushida's revelation, Mii-chan, who had the fact that she's in love with Yōsuke exposed, didn't seem to have the courage to openly ask him out. I wasn't sure if I could take that away from her... but she wasn't the only one who was eyeing him.

As if to validate this, I could see that several girls were shooting gazes at me. Yōsuke was looking them in the eye and appealing to them.

He was concerned about the possibility of a firestorm caused by competition for seats, so he decided to make the best of it.

“It's tough being popular, isn't it?”

“I don't mean to be popular.”

He answered simply and matter-of-factly, without any conceit.

The ability to perceive the unwritten rules of the class is outstanding.

“Is it okay if I have Yōsuke sit next to me, Kei?”

“Huh? I'd like to say no, but I don't have a choice. Okay.”

Kei seemed to be very open to Yōsuke, to whom she owed a debt of gratitude, and agreed.

“In exchange, Kiyotaka will sit on the aisle side. I'll sit on the opposite side of the aisle.”

Well, I guess that would be the safest thing to do. As a result, we were able to settle into four seats in one row a little further back than the middle of the bus, with Yōsuke and I on the far left and Kei and Satō on the other side of the aisle.

A few minutes later, all four vehicles had been fully boarded, and we departed for the airport.

During the bus ride, students weren't allowed to get up from their seats but were free to chat and consume the food and drinks they brought with them.

Some of the students began to take out snacks and drinks as soon as they could.

“It's starting to feel like a real trip, isn't it?”

Yōsuke, sensing the state of things around him, murmured happily.

The man who considered other people's happiness to be his own was probably comfortable with the frivolous feelings of his fellow students.

“It would've been great if Kiyotaka had also been in my group.”

Kei was in the same group as Akito, with whom she usually had no contact at all.

“That's why it's a good opportunity, isn't it? It's not often you get the chance to interact with other people.”

“I guess so....”

I guess she was expecting me to miss her too, and her lips pouted in frustration.

Yōsuke was in the same group as Matsushita, and Satō was in the same group as Okitani.

“How are you and Kei doing these days, Ayanokōji-kun? Are things going well?”

“You don't need to confirm that, do you?”

“Maybe she's just trying to be nice.”

“Don't be silly. We're super in love. Right?”

Such silly exchanges continued until we arrived at the airport.

1

We landed at Shin-Chitose Airport and began lining up in the airport lobby. We boarded the bus to Haneda by class, but from here on, we started to proceed according to our groups.

Mashima-sensei was in charge of groups 1 through 5, Chabashira-sensei was in charge of groups 6 through 10, Sakagami-sensei was in charge of groups 11 through 15, and Hoshinomiya-sensei was in charge of groups 16 through 20.

“When all the groups are in place, please discuss and decide on the seats allocated to each of you.”

Group 6 was assigned eight seats on the bus.

We were to discuss and decide where we’d sit in these eight seats.

Incidentally, we were located in two rows, with two seats on each side from the front of Car 2.

I went with my group to the area led by Chabashira-sensei.

“It looks like we’re in the same group, Ayanokōji-kun,” said Kushida.

“I guess so,” I replied. “Though, I’m sure you’ll be fine with whoever you’re in a group with.”

“I’m not sure... Ryūen-kun is a bit unwelcoming.”

I don’t know exactly to what extent she revealed her true colors to other classes, but I believe that Ryūen and Kushida had been working together for a while. In that sense, each may be a difficult partner for the other to deal with.

I don’t think he’d be a scary partner anymore, though. Kushida isn’t the type of person who’s afraid of anyone. Even if he were to make a malicious comment, it would have no effect on her classmates.

“I know,” she said, “but since Ryūen-kun is trying for Class A again, he might try to threaten me one day. I wasn’t sure how I was going to handle it, but now I feel a lot more relaxed about it.”

Even if her true nature gets exposed, it won’t affect many people.

It seems that even Kushida made such a resolution.

“Kikyō-chan!”

As if to get out of the crowd of students, a boy and a girl from Ichinose’s class raised their hands.

The two were Watanabe and Amikura. As a matter of course, Kushida and Amikura seemed to be good friends. They took each other’s hands and rejoiced at being in the same group. On the surface, they acted as though they were best friends, but when I thought about it deep down inside, Kushida must’ve been unmoved. I felt like I was watching an amazing spectacle.

“I’ll be seeing you for five days starting now.”

Watanabe called out to me, and I slightly raised my hand in reply.

I had never interacted with him before, so this would be a good opportunity to become familiar with his personality.

That was half of the group. The next to appear was Nishino, followed shortly by Ryūen.

“Good morning, Nishino-san, and you too, Ryūen-kun.”

Kushida took the lead, smiling and calling out to them. Watanabe and Amikura followed suit.

“...”

Nishino looked a little awkward, as if she hadn't had much interaction with Kushida or Amikura.

Ryūen didn't reply to anyone in particular but stopped and kept his distance.

“The only ones left are Kitō and Yamamura,” she said.

“If it's those two, they're already here.”

“What?”

I pointed behind Kushida and everyone noticed that the two Class A students were quietly joining us, walking side by side.

Kitō showed up and glared at Ryūen with a mixture of silent pressure and enmity.

Yamamura, on the other hand, approached with her eyes downcast, not looking at anyone.

It looked like we were all here, so we needed to decide where we were going to sit.

Having someone in the group who took the initiative at times like this was a very important factor. If a problem were to occur, I would be a little concerned about the leader of Class C's, Ryūen.

Surprisingly though, he didn't seem to have anything in particular to say about the matter.

Was it that he had no intention of leading the group, or did he think it was unnecessary to go out of his way for something as trivial as determining our seats?

“I think it's better to seat us by gender.”

Kushida took the initiative and suggested her idea alongside Amikura.

“I'm not sure what to think about that. Does anyone have any objections?”

No one objected to the idea of having the boys and girls sit separately. Neither Nishino nor Yamamura seemed bothered. The boys couldn't complain about the suggestion either. If they did object, it would create a group of boys who wanted to sit with girls.

“Then, let's have the girls sit with the girls and the boys sit with the boys, shall we?”

Saying this, Kushida deftly started to move away from the boys' side.

Watanabe and I naturally gathered together, but Ryūen and Kitō didn't move an inch.

"The atmosphere caused by a troublesome duo is amazing, isn't it?"

"I guess so."

"I don't care who it is but I just can't see myself talking to Ryūen or Kitō."

"Can you see that with me?"

"What? Well... More than those two?"

I couldn't honestly be pleased because of the individuals to whom I was being compared. Personally, I would rather be next to Watanabe and stay out of trouble. However, our wishes were not met because Kitō suddenly approached us.

"There's no way I'm sitting with him. I have no complaints regarding you two as long as I'm not next to Ryūen."

He mumbled this remark in annoyance and returned to his original position.

"...What do we do?"

"If we force those two to sit side by side, we're going to be in big trouble."

Watanabe could easily imagine this and nodded his head in dismay.

"Then we'll have to go our separate ways. Who do you prefer?"

"I don't care, which one do you prefer? Either is fine with me, just sit with whomever you like," Watanabe said.

"How about you choose whomever you like?"

Watanabe, faced with two choices that made him want to hold his head in his hands, pondered for a while before giving his answer.

"For now, I'm going to sit next to Kitō. See, he's usually very quiet. I don't think he'll do anything if we don't show hostility towards him. It's true that Kitō isn't as scary as he looks."

He certainly had an image of being harmless to everyone except those who were hostile towards him.

Well, let's finish our greetings here, too.

I went over to where Ryūen was.

"I know it may not be what you want, but I'll be your neighbor during this bus ride. You can have the window seat as a courtesy."

"Suit yourself."

So far, he's been as quiet as a borrowed cat.

"You must have misunderstood something, Ayanokōji."

"Misunderstood?"

"The battle between me and Sakayanagi has already begun."

Saying this, Ryūen shot Kitō a glance.

The other party, Kitō, also glared at him as if he'd expected it.

"I see. The school trip's a place where interaction with other classes is inevitable."

“It’s a great opportunity to see how much of a man Kitō is. Depending on the situation, we should destroy him while we still can.”

It was a very dangerous statement that made me think that we weren't about to embark on a joyful and happy trip to Hokkaido.

Come to think of it, Sakayanagi was in group 4.

I recalled the members who were assigned to the group.

From Ryūen's class, it was Tokitō Hiroya, and Morofuji Rika.

The second semester wasn't over yet, but it wasn't a bad thing that they've already started considering the end of the school year. If the two classes were to clash when only one was ready for battle, the other would have a tough time.

The school, deciding that the group discussion was over, began to lead the way.

Ryūen was given the window seat on the bus, and I sat next to him.

The buses, which had been seating each class, were full of energy, but it was so quiet now that the previous liveliness almost seemed like a lie.

A group designated by the school, including students from other classes—it would take some time for the students, who weren't all that close to each other, to open up and have casual conversations. As if to prove this, nearly half of the students who boarded the bus preferred to stick together based on class rather than gender.

This was an example of how it inevitably winds up when you can't take the initiative to decide who to sit next to, as Kushida did.

Still, the students were all analogous in their desire to have fun.

By the time the bus had been driving for about 30 minutes, the introductions were mostly finished and group chatter was beginning to spread a bit beyond just people's own classmates.

Then, when we were told that karaoke was available, one of the boys started singing with a microphone in hand.

“I felt some similar vibes as you from that first-year kid, Yagami. How do you know him?”

I didn't think Ryūen would ever talk to me while we were on the bus, but without warning, those words came flying out of his mouth.

He was leaning on his elbows, not looking at me, as if he were talking to himself.

“What if I told you he’s completely irrelevant?”

“That ain't gonna happen. He was going to go to you even if he had to knock out the teacher. Surely that can't be considered irrelevant?”

“I knew him for a while. Nothing more, nothing less.”

“Mmh? I'm just saying, it smells like fun to me.”

“It doesn't matter if you focus on that first year. What's important is that you get to Class A.”

“I'll do what I want to do. It might help me if I beat it out of him sometime.”

I see. He wasn't so much interested in Yagami, but in the possibility that he might've been a weak point of mine.

Well, it wasn't a weakness, but it was undeniably a troublesome factor.

“The school isn't going to tell me about it. They're going to keep it a secret. Moreover, the school seemed to tacitly approve of it. I think I saw what the stinking bastards were really like for a moment.”

“I'm sorry to hear that. Yagami is gone.”

“It's true that that guy has left, but I hear there's another girl left, Amasawa, who's been with you from the first years. I can play with her if I want.”

Apparently, Yagami left behind a bit of information.

In a one-on-one fight, Amasawa wouldn't fall behind.

In Ryūen's case, however, that wouldn't be the end of the story.

It's easy to imagine that he would persistently continue with his attempts to gain an opening, and repeatedly try to make contact with the opponent.

Of course, under normal circumstances, Amasawa would have the ability to handle this to some extent, but now that Yagami had left the school, the situation was unstable.

“Oh well. It'll be a little while before I fuck with you anyway.” Ryūen replied, seeing my thoughtfulness.

“By the way, Ryūen, I have a question. Actually, it's something that's been bothering me since this morning.”

“What?”

I reached over into the mesh pocket attached to the back of the seat in front of me.

I reached in and pulled out a set of black plastic bags.

“I've always wondered what these bags are for.”

“Oh?”

He raised his eyebrows and snickered, as if in doubt.

“You use these bags to throw up when you're drunk, right? Are you kidding me?”

I see. If you get carsick, there's certainly a possibility that you'll vomit.

This is what's commonly known as an etiquette bag.

“The buses used for the Uninhabited Island Exam weren't equipped with such bags. I guess they don't always have them available.”

I'd ridden the bus several times before, but this was the first time I'd seen them in the pockets like this.

I guess it's for people's own sake, as well as the bus company's consideration.

It would be very difficult to clean if vomit and other things were scattered all over the seats and floor.

Even if you think you've studied a lot, there are countless things you don't know.

Outside of the school, I'm sure there will be many encounters with the unknown.

“You're as strange as ever. You've never even been on a bus before, have you?”

“I haven't been on that many buses.”

I've seen a lot of kids throw up because of a disturbance in the semicircular canal, but I've never been in an environment where I was allowed to throw up in a bag like this. I don't think it's unreasonable to assume that it's okay to throw up.

I've experienced a mild sensation of drunkenness myself, so I'll keep this in mind as a reminder that there are such convenient things out there.

2

After having lunch at a large cafeteria attached to the ski resort, the second-year students were finally given a skiing lesson. They were also instructed not to take their cell phones on the slopes due to high risk of loss or malfunction.

There were some complaints from students who were dependent on their cell phones and other students who insisted that they were used to handling them, but it couldn't be helped as the school's instructions couldn't be broken.

Fortunately, the school also informed the students that they would be allowed to bring their cell phones if they voluntarily went to the ski resort from the next day onward. However, in case of loss or destruction of a phone, a reasonable amount of private points will be required.

After that, we wore our rented ski wear and received our ski boots.

The outside of the boots seemed to be made of plastic. Following the instructions, we unbuckled them, opened the inner lining, and put our feet into the boots. I adjusted them to fit my heels, straightened the innerwear, and tightened the buckles from the bottom to the top. Finally, I donned the power belt and powder guard.

They said this was the bare minimum of preparation.

I tried to walk normally, but apparently that wasn't correct.

Following the instructor, I landed on my heels and walked smoothly.

When I was done preparing, I went outside.

We were divided into three groups: advanced skiers, intermediate skiers, and beginners.

Having no skiing experience, I joined the group of beginners without hesitation.

I could've looked it up in a book or on the Internet beforehand, but I didn't want to listen to any unnecessary information when I could learn on-site instead.

About 60% of the students in the class requested the beginner course.

I wasn't sure if this was considered a large number, but I was a little surprised that about 40% of the students were intermediate or advanced skiers. It would seem that people in the Kanto area rarely had a chance to ski, but they must've had some experience.

The sixth group's members, Ryūen, Kitō, Nishino and Kushida, were absent, probably because they were intermediate or above, and the rest of the members seemed to be beginners.

The beginner course, with a large number of people, was further divided into groups of about 10 people each, and the instructor taught them how to ski from the basics.

I listened to the instructor's explanation with great interest as I was touching ski equipment for the first time.

On the other hand, the smallest group, the advanced skiers, seemed to be free to ski after receiving only a brief explanation, and they were already getting ready to go out onto the slopes.

Ryūen was among them.

He brushed the snow off the soles of his boots, adjusted his boots to the bindings front to back, and stepped on them with his heels. I see. He would walk with both feet in the same position.

I was surprised that I didn't fall down when I walked, but I was puzzled by the sensation for the first time.

I think that... for now...

I tried to start sliding a little more forcefully using the poles and deliberately tilted my center of gravity to the left.

My body fell down as opposed to both boards moving forward.

“...Are you okay?”

Yamamura, who was watching nearby, called out to me in a small voice.

“Yeah, I'm fine. I just wanted to see how cold the snow was.”

“Haa...”

There was a bit of laughter around us, but we didn't care.

Ryūen, who I thought was already headed for the lift, raised the corners of his mouth slightly when he saw me falling, and walked away, as if satisfied.

Perhaps he wanted to see me fail.

“Be careful there!”

I bowed my head and apologized for the warning and followed the instructor's instructions.

Afterwards, we actually tried to ski a little, and surprisingly, many people fell down.

I had a couple of unintentional falls, but then I was starting to get the hang of it.

We were given a 30-minute lesson.

After the whole process was over, it was time to let loose.

“Okay, let's go.”

3

After the training, Watanabe and the others were all heading towards the beginner course, which had a gentle slope.

“Ayanokōji? You're not going?”

Watanabe, who had started walking away with his board, turned around and opened his mouth, curious.

“I think I'll ski somewhere else.”

“I see. I'll see you later.”

I watched his back as he walked away and decided to start moving on my own.

“Hey, Ayanokōji, you're on the beginner course over there, and this is the advanced course.”

Ryūen, who was about to head for the advanced course, pointed his finger at me in annoyance.

“No, that's okay. I'm going to give it a try anyway.”

“Oh? That's an unexpected line from the guy who was penguin-walking a moment ago.”

“I don't think you should, Ayanokōji-kun. I was a little scared too because about 70% of it was hard humps and steep slopes.” Kushida said.

Apparently both of them had skied down it once, so they warned me.

“Yes, that's true...”

I thought I should heed the warning, since it was sensible to do so, but then...

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Yamamura restlessly climbing onto the lift for advanced skiers.

It was hard to believe that she had consciously chosen the advanced course. Perhaps it was the fact that she could see Kitō's back on the lift slightly ahead of her, or perhaps she got on by mistake without being stopped by anyone around her.

“I didn't think she'd already be willing to try that.”

“Huh?”

“Yamamura, I don't think she knows it's an advanced course.”

She told me about Yamamura, who was sitting on the lift that would take her to the top.

“I guess I'd better go after her...”

With that, I got on a ski lift for the first time in my life and we headed up to the advanced course together.

Kushida and I got on the lift together, as it could seat up to two people.

The lift, which never stopped, gradually began to rise and my feet left the ground.

“Interesting ride, isn't it?”

“It's your first time riding it, right? Aren't you scared?”

“I'm not scared. We're still at a relatively close height from the ground, so even if I fall, it won't hurt much.”

“Oh, that's the problem...?”

“Hmm? Isn't it the danger of falling that you're afraid of?”

“That's... Yeah. I guess that's what it's about.”

She looked puzzled—caught in her words—but I wasn't sure why.

“Oh well. I've been thinking lately that it's useless to wonder about you.”

She exhaled, and a bit of Kushida's skin peeked out.

The distance between the lifts was relatively short, and the wind was blowing slightly, so she decided that the chit-chat wouldn't be heard by Ryūen in front of us or those who were behind us.

“That's not a very nice thought.”

No one would be pleased to be told that it was useless to even think about them.

“I can't help it. I actually feel that way.”

After saying that, Kushida gazed at the mountains in the distance.

“I'm confident in my ability to read a person's aura and understand what others are thinking. This applies to Horikita-san and Ryūen-kun as well. That said, there are times when I'm outperformed by other factors and lose.”

Even if you can read your opponent's thoughts, it doesn't mean you'll always win.

“As for you, Ayanokōji-kun, I thought I could read you before. But I was completely wrong. I've never met someone whose thoughts I've had no idea about until you.”

“As a reference, how does that make you feel?”

“What? You want to hear that?”

She didn't look back, asking that with her head turned.

“I guess I shouldn't have asked after all.”

The atmosphere strongly suggested that she was unwilling to answer.

“By the way...”

Kushida clearly had something on her mind as she was trying to get the words out.

“This is important, so I need to confirm it here and now, but you're not trying to get me expelled, are you?”

“You're asking me very clearly.”

“As long as I can't read your thoughts, this is the only thing on my mind. If I were you, Ayanokōji-kun, what would I think and how would I act?”

“So you're saying that the conclusion you came to was that you're going to get expelled from school?”

Kushida nodded without hesitation and peered into my eyes.

She seemed to be trying to shake me up and draw out my true feelings.

I dared to avert my gaze and give the impression that I was trying to get her to drop out of school.

If you looked at it from a normal person's perspective, I was caught off-guard and upset, and then looked away.

I thought it would be interesting to see what Kushida would think.

“Are you kidding me?”

“I'm sorry...”

The darkness that had been hiding under her face revealed itself, and I immediately apologized, understanding that I was being glared at furiously even though she was still smiling.

“I mean, you're definitely making fun of me. Is that supposed to be funny?”

“No, it's not funny at all. I'm sorry.”

I'm sure she didn't like it, but it was a great way for Kushida to understand my thoughts.

“I have no intention of expelling you.”

“...Really?”

“As soon as Horikita decided to keep you, the line of me expelling you from the school disappeared. If I wanted to keep that possibility open even now, I would've told off Horikita.”

This may not have cleared Kushida's suspicions, but it was an indisputable fact.

“During the Unanimous Vote Special Exam...right?”

For her, that special exam must've been an unforgettable and humiliating time.

However, it was necessary that Kushida doesn't repeat the same mistake in the future, though I don't need to go to the trouble of mentioning that here.

That was no longer a realistic possibility now that all of our classmates knew about it.

“Even if I can't expel all of them, there's still the possibility that I'll abandon this class. Perhaps I can get a class transfer ticket or save up the necessary private points. I could even escape that way. Can you close your eyes to such a risk?”

It's a funny thing to think that Kushida could call herself a risk.

“That's not treachery or anything, it's just a personal strategy. There's nothing wrong with moving to a class where you can win as the school actually has that system in place. In fact, if you think your class doesn't have a chance to win, you should move on when the time is right.”

Who has the right to tell her that she should continue to sail on a sinking ship?

“I still can't read you, Ayanokōji-kun. I can't even tell if you're really speaking from your heart at all.”

“Maybe I'm someone who doesn't show it on their face.”

“It's not at that level, but...”

Kushida turned her attention to the soon-to-be-approaching destination.

“I wonder why. My secret, which I absolutely wanted to keep hidden, has been exposed, and I'm so frustrated and bitter that I'm sure it doesn't matter anymore... But, I'm enjoying myself, coming on a school trip and skiing. And I even feel like it's not a bad thing.”

“School trips are fun events for a lot of students, right?”

“For a lot of people, yes. But for me, I've always found any event to be a hassle.”

The effort to keep pretending to be something you're not.

That's what's needed at events like this.

“Hey, can I ask you a few questions about... Yagami-kun and Amasawa-san?”

“They're both first-year students. I've tangled with Amasawa a bit, but I know very little about Yagami.”

I made sure to remind her like so, but Kushida may have just wanted to ask the questions she had been keeping inside.

“If Ayanokōji-kun doesn't know, then I don't think it can be helped.”

“It's fine. So? What's wrong with those two?”

“You know Yagami-kun was expelled from school, right?”

“I heard that it came to light that he was violent during the Uninhabited Island Exam. It serves to reason he'd be expelled from school. The most important thing to remember is that you can't just take a chance on a new person and expect them to be good.”

Yagami was a White Room student. In other words, there was no connection between Kushida and her past.

He probably faked it based on the information given to him by Tsukishiro, and it was likely he had Yagami pretend to be her junior in order to avoid the risk of learning about his past. However, there was no way for me, an outsider, to deduce this, so I had no choice but to give this answer.

“No, it's not that. Yagami-kun... Knew about my past. The only people who went to the same junior high school as me were the Horikita siblings.”

“Then how are you sure he knew about your past?”

“Because he told me directly. I naturally suspected Horikita-san and you. Ryūen-kun also knows my true nature, but he doesn't know about my past, so we can rule him out.”

Indeed, one's true nature and past were two completely different things.

“But it doesn't add up in Horikita-san's case, does it? There's no merit in talking about my past. If that's the case, then by process of elimination, you would be the only one. That's what's been bugging me.”

“I see.”

Indeed, I was one of the few students who knew about Kushida's past.

It was inevitable that the Unanimous Vote Special Exam would turn hostile, but one of them had a reason for me to suspect them. Moreover, it was obvious that Amasawa, who was also involved with Yagami, became even more suspicious.

Even if I simply denied it, the question of who told him would still haunt her. Whether the doubts will be dispelled is another matter.

“I don't care either way. I just want the truth.”

“Even if I was connected to Yagami, would you forgive me?”

“What? I don't think I would forgive you. It's just that I don't think I'm going to do anything to you just because I'm sure... If anything, I'm seen as someone who can't be considered an enemy anymore.”

Her fangs were now quietly contained within. She said that she won't be baring them again.

“I can't think of anyone else besides you, but when I think about it, it might not be you after all. Yagami wanted you expelled from school. He wasn't pretending, he was doing it from the bottom of his heart. It's a contradiction, isn't it?”

It also raised questions about the meaning of my connection to Yagami and the information I was passing on to him.

It was just a hassle to go to the trouble of cornering Kushida like that.

It might be a bit harsh to let her continue her school life with this question plaguing her.

That said, I couldn't talk about the specifics of the White Room.

“I used to know Yagami, even though we were in different... Schools. We used to live near each other.”

“What...?”

“And so did Amasawa. I think I gave those two the wrong impression, and they've been holding a grudge against me for a long time. I was able to clear up the misunderstanding with Amasawa, but not so with Yagami. I dealt with it by ignoring him, but I didn't realize he'd been in contact with you without my knowledge.”

“Wait, even if that's the case, it's weird. How could he know about me?”

“I don't know how he found out, but since you're one of my classmates, he got your information. I think he was looking for an opportunity to get revenge on me. In other words, you were simply caught in the crossfire.”

I bowed my head and apologized to Kushida.

“Even though I didn't know, I'm sorry I got you involved.”

“...Ayanokōji-kun.”

I'm not saying it was going to clear everything up, but I think the revelation that those two and I had a connection in the past will help answer some of the questions in Kushida's mind.

“Could it be that Yagami-kun was expelled from school because of... you?”

“If left alone, there was a strong possibility that you, who chose to cooperate with the class, would be harmed again. The reason Amasawa was in contact with you was probably because she knew that Yagami would do something to you.”

I answered along the lines of an honest admission.

I had been in contact with Nagumo, Ryūen, and Horikita, several people who either knew of or suspected my involvement.

If the fact that I denied it came to light later, it would become even more troublesome.

“I left Amasawa in school, but as I said before, her misunderstanding has been cleared up. She shouldn't interfere with you in the future. There may still be some problems with her behavior, though.”

An environment in which Kushida could maximize her abilities in school from here on out.

That could've been created from this unexpected discussion.

“I...”

A strong wind blew, and Kushida's white, knit hat was about to be blown off.

To prevent this, I reached out and held the hat in my palm.

At the same time, Kushida's hand came up to meet mine.

“Sorry, thanks...”

She could've prevented it from being blown away even if I hadn't helped her, but Kushida turned her face towards me and thanked me. Immediately afterwards, she stiffened up and kept staring into my eyes.

“What's wrong?”

“...Nothing, it's nothing.”

I didn't know what that expressionless face was thinking, but she shifted her gaze soon after.

The lift then reached its destination and we began to prepare to get off.

“Can you make it?”

“I think I can, somehow.”

I answered in the positive, but Kushida had gone down first as though she was illustrating how it's done, so I followed her example. After a long lift ride, we arrived at the advanced course.

As expected, there were fewer people on this course than the easier ones, but there was still a good number.

“This is pretty awesome, but isn't it steeper than you thought it would be?”

The slope looked more compact than the sight from below suggested, as Kushida pointed out.

“Are you sure you can handle it?”

“Well, I'll manage.”

“If it comes down to it, you might want to take off your skis and then walk down the side. It might not look good, though.”

Many were sliding down the slope, but no skiers appeared to be obvious beginners. Meanwhile, several men and women were gathered around Ryūen.

“Those are the students in Ryūen's class, right? I wonder if he's surprisingly popular.”

“They don't look like they're talking happily, though.”

“Indeed.”

The gathered students were telling Ryūen something with rather serious expressions.

Ryūen, who was at the center of the circle, didn't look at any particular student and seemed to be listening nonchalantly.

What was the point of gathering all the way at the advanced course, where there would be fewer people?

If he wanted to keep in touch with the class, he could just use his cell phone later.

Then I could only assume that they intentionally gathered here.

“Did they have something to report by any chance?”

“Looks like it.”

The gathered members were those who often received instructions from Ryūen, such as Kaneda, Ishizaki, and Chikon Todo.

“There she is, Ayanokōji-kun. Yamamura-san.”

Sure enough, in the direction Kushida was looking, was Yamamura.

Not slipping out, she was staring at Ryūen's class and the others as they disbanded.

“Yama-”

I signaled to Kushida, who was about to call out in a loud voice, to be quiet with my finger and a glance.

“What? What's wrong?”

“Wait a minute.”

Yamamura's movement seemed a little puzzling. She knew she was making a mistake, but she quickly stepped into the advanced course, and then, as if to hide, she continued staying there, her own presence muted.

“What kind of student is Yamamura?”

“What kind of student? I don't really know either.”

“What kind of student do you, Kushida, the one who is familiar with the largest number of students, not know about?”

“It's true. I can understand a student who spontaneously engages in conversation with me, but Yamamura-san is different. She's never approached me, and when I've approached her, she either responded with a short answer or a silent nod, and that's it. That's not a good way to get to know someone, is it?”

If she was closed-minded, then surely that was something even Kushida could do nothing about.

“Who are the students she gets along with in Class A?”

“I don't know that either. I can't picture her talking to anyone at all. She's very, very invisible, isn't she?”

Although the group had only just formed, she certainly didn't leave much of an impression.

Yamamura's OAA shows that she wasn't physically strong, but she had high academic ability.

Soon after, the students who gathered around Ryūen scattered and returned to their own groups.

At the same time, Yamamura shifted her gaze from Ryūen and slowly began to move.

The two of us followed so as not to lose sight of Yamamura.

“Oh, I fell.”

Yamamura fell down on the spot, perhaps having been caught in the snow.

There seemed to be people around, but no one noticed or even pretended to help or care.

“It's not easy being in the shadows, is it?”

“So why are you looking at her?”

“Because she seems to lack presence.”

It's a sad aspect of life that can't be denied.

No matter how hard you work, it's not easy to progress in that area.

“By the way, what do you think of Yamamura's movements?”

“You ran away from the conversation.”

“I'm not running away.”

I denied it, but Kushida laughed in a funny way.

“Yamamura-san's action seems to be under the instructions of... Someone who wants to keep an eye on Ryūen-kun's movements?”

“That would be the most likely explanation. Although that someone is probably only one person.”

“Sakayanagi-san, right. But I don't think she has any connection with Yamamura.”

“That's why it's perfect, right? No one's aware of their connection. If I hadn't been in the same group as Yamamura, I probably wouldn't have cared.”

The fact that we were in the same beginner group made me wonder what she was intending. If I had been an intermediate skier or higher, I wouldn't have continued caring and would've already begun skiing.

“If we don't know whether or not they have a connection, we should make sure.”

“It could be important when we fight Sakayanagi in the future. We can't avoid identifying Sakayanagi's important limbs.”

“I see.”

“Yamamura is on the move.”

We watched Yamamura.

She had taken off her skis and was walking down the steep slope along the edge.

“I'm going to go support her. Maybe we can get closer.”

Kushida made the decision to do what she had to and slid off the board.

“You move fast.”

She was quick-witted and smoothly understood my intentions.

Moreover, Kushida boasted strong interpersonal skills that allowed her to befriend most people.

She won't cut corners if that was the way to survive in her class.

4

After our time at the ski resort, we arrived at the ryokan shortly before 5 p.m.

We headed to the lobby in order, starting with the first group, to get to our assigned rooms.

Soon it was the sixth group's turn, and we followed suit.

Although the exterior of the hotel had a historical aesthetic, the interior of the lobby and the other areas were well-maintained and clean.

We changed into the ryokan's slippers, placed our luggage, containing clothes and other items, at our feet and waited to receive our keys.

“I knew it. I'm sleeping with these people.”

Watanabe let out a slightly melancholic sigh after receiving the keys in the lobby.

This was the room shared between our group, which would be cooperating starting today, and this couldn't be changed.

It was up to us to make it a comfortable space.

“Hey Watanabe!”

Watanabe turned around when his name was called, and a Boston bag loomed in front of him.

“Whoa!”

Watanabe, who caught the bag with both arms, was still surprised, unable to comprehend what just happened.

“Take it to the room. I'm going to the bathroom.”

Ryūen had thrown his own luggage, and he seemed to be planning on having Watanabe carry it.

While Watanabe, who didn't have the guts to refuse, was smiling bitterly, Ryūen disappeared towards the back of the building, probably to the large baths.

“I don't think I can do it.”

“I'll take it.”

“No, it's fine. I was asked to do it.”

I offered, or rather, I insisted on taking the issue off his hands.

“Give it to me. I'll send it back to him, or rather to hell.”

Kitō, seeing Ryūen's arrogant behavior, tried to snatch the Boston bag from his arms.

I put my arm between Kitō and Watanabe to stop him.

“It's better not to do anything troublesome. The one who'll suffer the most later on will be Watanabe, who he entrusted it to.”

“Then are you going to let that man do what he wants? If you back off now, something similar will happen next time. I don't care if he treats his own classmates as slaves, but Watanabe is a student from Ichinose's class.”

What he said was correct.

But even so, that didn't mean he should mess with the baggage.

“You should separate the matter from the Boston bag issue and tell him directly.”

“What if I don't say anything or he doesn't listen. Are you going to make Watanabe suffer through the trip?”

“Oh no, I'm not that much of a slave driver...”

If Ryūen imposes his selfishness onto Watanabe again, I'll stop him.

“You will?”

“If he doesn't listen to me, I'll take responsibility for everything.”

“That's a radical solution.”

“Not really. If the person entrusted with the work doesn't want to do it, only then is it force and coercion. In this case however, the problem has disappeared, don't you agree?”

Kitō believed that everything should be done by themselves.

He may not agree with my point, but he understood.

“...Do as you please.”

He glared at me for a while, but finally gave in and backed off.

“I'm sorry, Ayanokōji, it's my fault.”

“It's not your fault. It's only natural that we should join hands to solve the problems we have in this group.”

Just as I saw an expression of relief spread on Watanabe's face, the ryokan provided him with two keys to our room.

At about the same time, Kushida and the other three girls also received their keys and came over.

“You know what? I think we should talk about our group activities for tomorrow. This Hokkaido trip is very special, and I'm sure everyone has a lot of places they want to go.”

It was important to make plans in advance, but since we had been the only members of our group present, we hadn't been able to discuss our free activities until now.

“So, I was thinking that at night, the girls can visit the boys' room...”

“Oh, that would be great, wouldn't it?”

Watanabe lowered his eyes happily at the suggestion of the girls coming to visit.

Kitō, who was listening on his own, didn't respond with anything in particular, maintaining his silence.

“...Errr... Ah, you’re fine with it too, right Ayanokōji-kun?”

“That’s fine.”

Kushida smiled and clasped her hands together, not wanting to ignore the troubled Watanabe.

“Then it’s settled. See you later. I’ll call Amikura and the others and I’ll let you both know when we settle on a time.”

The girls would now enjoy the ryokan, soaking in the hot springs and eating dinner.

“Shall we go to our room too?”

“Right.”

It seems that the boys will be using rooms in the ryokan's East Wing area.

The girls, on the other hand, will be in the main building. Since they’re connected by a lobby, coming and going won’t be particularly difficult, but I guess they had to keep the genders separate.

“Isn't Kushida-chan too nice? She's cute and adorable.”

I had experienced firsthand that Kushida had a certain charm that attracted boys.

It was no wonder they were attracted to her based on their surface-level relationship.

If a student like Watanabe were to discover Kushida's true nature, who knows what would happen?

“I had considered it, but I still shudder to think what it would be like if it weren't for Kushida-chan.”

Indeed, Kushida has been invaluable in guiding the group. Even a meeting to decide on a free activity would be troublesome if there was no one to take the initiative in leading it.

I could only thank her for working to avoid that.

But I don't know if that will solve all the problems.

I still think the more pressing problems will be Ryūen and Kitō.

Ever since they started traveling together as group six, they’ve been constantly at each other’s throats.

They’ve been gauging and probing each other, so they were always in a state of constant confrontation.

We arrived at room 203, clacking our slippers as we proceeded down the corridor.

Inserting the key, I opened the door leading into the room.

The inside was reasonably spacious; it was a traditional, Japanese-style room about 12 tatami mats in size and it had a table with four chairs.

In addition, there was a mini table and two single-person sofas by the window.

I had seen a similar scene many times on TV, depicting a ryokan on the high street.

After putting my luggage in the Japanese-style room, I immediately opened the refrigerator.

It contained a small supply of soft drinks as well as free water.

However, the price per bottle was higher than the market price, and I saw no reason to touch them.

There seemed to be a vending machine in the lobby, so we could go buy some if needed.

After entering the room, Kitō sat in the corner in silence and closed his eyes.

Moreover, he was sitting in a zazen-like posture for some reason.

I left him alone and opened a thick file containing a guide.

The file had a map of the hotel, the name and password for the Wi-Fi provided by the inn, an explanation of the day-trip bathing service, and a list of nearby tourist attractions.

Maybe I'll have a chance to use it in discussions with Kushida and the other girls.

After a quick look around, I decided to take a final look at the restrooms and other facilities.

We also learned that the rooms don't seem to have individual baths and that bathing must be done in the main bathhouse. I guess there won't be any issues with this.

I would rather continue enjoying the large bath than soak in a small bathtub.

“Let's see...”

Dinner was served at 7:00 p.m., but there was still time to spare.

I should probably go to the public baths. There must be a lot of people there already.

“I'm going to the baths.”

“Oh, wait a minute. I'm coming with you!”

Watanabe, who was sitting on a chair, stood up as though he was about to fall down.

“What about you, Kitō?”

“I'm not ready.”

“I see. Then I'll leave you a key. I'll let Ryūen know when I see him.”

If he came back to the room when nobody was there, Ryūen wouldn't be able to enter.

That would be troublesome, so we'd have to avoid that.

As soon as we entered the hallway and closed the door, Watanabe muttered, his voice a whisper.

“I'm in trouble. You're going to sleep with Kitō and Ryūen too, right? Will you live until morning?”

“That's an exaggeration.”

“No, but it's four nights. It's not unreasonable to expect accidents to occur during that time.”

If that were the case, it would certainly be disastrous.

Aside from Ryūen and the others, sleeping with strangers is something I'm not used to.

I wonder if one day I'll be able to feel comfortable about the fact that I'm increasingly sharing my bedtime with others, both at last year's camp and in my relationship with Kei.

Since sleeping alone has been the norm for me since I was a child, my discomfort from the change in environment hasn't disappeared.

“You know something? You're easy to talk to,” Watanabe said.

“Really?... I don't know myself, but...”

I was happy to hear that, but I couldn't help but feel like I was just being compared to the other two.

“Well, now I can understand why Ichinose likes you so much...”

“Eh?”

“Oh, no! ...Forget about that!”

He realized his obvious blunder and corrected himself, but I clearly heard him. Well, hearing it won't change anything, but...

“You look like... You know?”

Watanabe looked a little relieved at my lack of response.

“I heard... The girls talking about that stuff. I think most of the boys are still oblivious, and they like Ichinose. But you're dating Karuizawa, who's in the same class as you, right?”

That was a fact, so I answered with a nod.

“It must be complicated for boys who like Ichinose. No, I think there are probably more guys who are rather happy about it.”

“What about you, Watanabe?”

“Me? I'm... Well, it's a secret.”

The calmness of his demeanor suggested that he didn't have any special feelings for Ichinose.

I didn't know who, but he seemed to have feelings for another girl.

“This school trip is a big event, right? Maybe there won't be only one or two guys who confess their feelings to a girl they like.”

“Is that so?”

This was definitely true for Sudō; he was determined to confess his feelings to Horikita on the school trip.

Was that not an unusual thing to do, or was it an important event for students?

“Me too~ ...If I had a little more courage, I'd think about it.”

He shook his head from side to side in frustration, though he seemed to only be imagining things.

“Anyway, I don't know too much about girls right now. I'm going to start by practicing how to make myself more likable so that the girls in my group will like me. If I can be the kind of guy who leaves a lasting impression, I can build on my experience for the real thing.”

I've only been in contact with Watanabe for less than half a day, but I didn't get any bad impressions from him.

Basically, there's no doubt that he's a good guy. His academic and physical abilities on the OAA are both C+, slightly above average. He also scored a C or higher in other areas. In other words, he didn't have any flaws that seemed to be issues. Depending on the partner, it seems reasonable to believe that there'll be enough potential.

There were many factors intertwined with love, and appearance and ability alone didn't determine the success or failure of a confession.

It depended on the relationship built between the two parties.

5

It was 8:37 p.m. After finishing dinner, many of the students went to the large baths, the best part of the ryokan. This was no exception for Suzune, one of the students who had been eagerly looking forward to dinner.

Relatively speaking, Horikita finished her meal earlier than the other students; however, she was surprised to find that three students had already started undressing in the changing room. This included one girl who, not wanting to be seen naked, decided to cut off her meal early and make quick work of it.

For Horikita, on the other hand, there was no such thing as aversion or shame at being seen naked by the same sex. Originally, in elementary and junior high, she was a shadowy, inconspicuous figure in a friendless environment, and this was partly due to the fact that no one paid any attention to her appearance.

Even so, she opened the sliding door to the large bathroom, spreading out her face towel to cover her front body as if it was some kind of etiquette.

A rush of heat travelled through her, and the large bath, which was one size larger than she had imagined, burst into view. There were two large indoor baths. There was also an outdoor open-air bath, but it was a large, rocky bath that could be seen through the window glass.

After lightly washing off the dirt on her body in the hot water, Horikita immediately headed for the rock bath.

She then saw two unexpected guests.

One of them was her classmate, Kushida Kikyō.

“Ah, Horikita-san.”

Kushida, who immediately recognized the visitor, replied with a light wave of her hand as if to welcome her.

Of course, Horikita understood that this wasn't her real intention.

The reason was that Rokkaku Momoe, a student from Class A, was also present.

Kushida would never do anything that would reveal her true feelings in the presence of other classes.

Horikita, who answered with a light glance, entered the bathtub and headed for the edge without joining Kushida.

She wanted to secure a spot where she wouldn't be disturbed and no one would call out to her. She listened to Kushida and Rokkaku's idle chatter and continued to enjoy the hot spring for five or ten minutes, not speaking to anyone.

Before she knew it, Rokkaku had left and only Kushida remained.

No trace of her previous smile remained on her face.

“Why didn't you go out with Rokkaku-san? Weren't you together?”

“Huh? I don't have any reason to. I love hot springs. Did you think I wanted to talk to you?”

“No, that wasn't what I was thinking.”

“Really? I thought you asked me because you were aware of me.”

“You're coming at me, aren't you?”

Horikita sighed with slight regret at Kushida's sudden belligerence.

“You really have a wide circle of friends. I've never even spoken to Rokkaku-san.”

Trying to change the subject, Horikita turned the conversation to Rokkaku, who had just left the outdoor bath.

“Momoe came crying to me, asking me to come with her. She said she was embarrassed or something. It wasn't too much to ask, though, since it's coming from such a poor body.”

Even though she knew no one was listening, she spat out a moderately strong venom.

“You're... well, you're as well-endowed as you'd expect. It's not so interesting for us, though.”

After a pricey observation, Kushida closed the distance to Horikita a little.

“What? Why are you coming here?”

“Nothing. It's just that the distance between us is unnatural. Isn't it strange? You and I are classmates. If it were me, I'd be talking to you from closer.”

With Rokkaku in the bath, it wouldn't be strange if the two of them were far apart. However, if they were blatantly separated in this large, open-air bath, there was a possibility that new visitors would have questions.

“I understand too well that you don't truly want to do that.”

“You're right. The best thing would be for you to get out of here and go to the indoor baths.”

“I'm going to have to turn that down.”

“You're pretty stubborn, aren't you, Horikita-san?”

Horikita sighed even more at the fact that she would suggest something like that.

Seeing this, Kushida smiled.

“You have a very elegant smile.”

“Of course I do. People can see this place from the inner bath, so I can't do anything bad.”

In addition to her voice, she was also constantly calculating how she appeared to others. From the inside, the students who glanced at them in the bathhouse will only see classmates chatting amiably with each other.

“If you care that much about having the upper hand, maybe you should've spent your school life in a way that prevented others from finding out about you.”

“I was under a lot of stress when I first entered the school. I didn’t think that Horikita-san would be here, would I?”

“That must’ve been unexpected...”

The disappointment was immeasurable for Kushida, who thought she was completely cut off from the people she had known in middle school.

“Living only on the premise of building new relationships. You had to vent somehow, right?”

As a result, the tragedy began when Ayanokōji found her venting.

“You’re free to continue hating me. If that makes you contribute to the class, I have no complaints. I saw your performance at the cultural festival, and it was remarkable.”

“Well, I can do something like that without difficulty. It’s a weapon to protect myself...”

At this point, Kushida stopped talking and looked at the sliding door leading to the open-air bath.

It opened and out came Ibuki, draping a face towel over her shoulders.

Kushida, alarmed by the visitor, suddenly relaxed.

Ibuki already had a good understanding of Kushida’s true nature, along with Horikita.

“Horikita!”

Ibuki was looking for Horikita, and when she caught sight of her, she raised her voice.

“What do you want?”

As she approached, completely naked, she jumped up and entered the open-air bath.

A sizable spray of hot water splashed Horikita and Kushida.

“That’s a huge breach of manners.”

“I know, but I don’t care about that. Let’s play!”

“Are you going to play rock-paper-scissors?”

“What? This is such a big bathing area, there’s only one thing to do. Let’s see who can swim from one end to the other the fastest!”

“I’d say swimming constitutes even worse manners than jumping in.”

“It doesn’t matter. It’s not like there’s other people here, and no one’s watching us.”

“That’s fine. I’ll be watching you fairly, so why don’t you do it?”

Kushida supported the idea of having a race.

“What are you even talking about? In the first place, you’re the one who’s supposed to stop such things, aren’t you?”

“It's okay because Horikita-san and Ibuki-san will pretend that they started it on their own without asking me to stop them. As long as you make a confused face and feign ignorance, I don't mind others seeing this.”

“Kushida said it's okay too, so we'll play!”

“I won't.”

“What? I came here thinking I could compete with you. I lost.”

Saying that, she quickly got out of the bathtub.

“Did you really show up just for that? Are you sure you don't want to take an outdoor bath?”

“I don't want to go in there with you.”

She quickly got out, not wanting to take a long bath if she couldn't compete.

“You're an idiot, Ibuki-san.”

After the sliding door was closed tightly, Kushida laughed.

“You're insanely obsessed with competing with me too. You're just like her.”

Kushida had also repeatedly asked Horikita to engage in battle.

When Horikita suggested that she and Ibuki were similar, Kushida chuckled.

“Don't be like that.”

What she said and her expression didn't quite match, but Horikita brushed it off.

She thought more people would arrive so that there would be no further need for conversation, but no student showed up after that as it was still meal-time.

“By the way, you were lucky, weren't you Horikita-san?”

“Lucky? What on earth are you talking about?”

“Because Ayanokōji-kun was seated next to you as soon as he entered the school. It was because of that that you two were able to get closer, and he helped you out a lot behind the scenes, didn't he?”

So far, Kushida didn't know the details of what actually happened.

But she did know that Ayanokōji was involved in one way or another, in some key points.

“If it weren't for Ayanokōji-kun, you would've been expelled by me by now.”

It wasn't my own ability that got me to this point.

If such a thing had been said in the past, Horikita would've immediately objected. But now she was able to reflect and see things calmly.

“I can't completely deny that. But it wasn't just a lucky break for me; it would've been a lucky break for you as well. Without Ayanokōji-kun, you wouldn't have been exposed for everything. You would've continued to play the good girl all these years, and you would've made the same mistakes all over again.”

Of course, the outcome isn't predictable.

It was quite possible that Kushida could've survived the three years of school life wearing the guise of a good person.

But whether she could continue to do so forever was another matter.

In fact, she was in constant pain day in and day out.

Now she was able to disperse her stress by using both sides of the coin.

"Maybe..."

A statement of fact made by someone you don't like. Normally, it would be nothing more than humiliation to admit it, but Kushida nodded her head and replied that there was a part of her that had to concede.

It was something she was able to gain because she was pushed to the brink of death in the Unanimous Vote Special Exam and returned alive.

For the first time in her life, her way of thinking and values had changed.

"If you think about it, you were probably luckier than I was."

"That honestly pisses me off. It's really annoying when Horikita-san gives back the upper hand to me."

At this point, they stopped speaking to each other.

They weren't normally in a position to engage each other, and there was no particular reason for them to take a long bath together.

Neither of them had a clear answer as to why they were staying, but leaving first would mean defeat. There was such an atmosphere in the air.

"...Sorry to bother you."

It was a few minutes after Ibuki left that their time alone together came to an end.

Ichinose appeared in the open-air bath a little reservedly.

"Ichinose-san, you're alone? That's kind of unusual."

"Ahaha... It just sort of happened."

Kushida knew that many people had spoken to Ichinose at dinner.

From this, it was clear that she had shown up here because she wanted to be alone.

"I think everyone needs time to be alone at some point. If I'm intruding, I'll leave."

The heat was starting to burn a little stronger, as Horikita decided that this was the time to extinguish it.

She switched places with Ichinose, and the two of them naturally passed the baton to each other.

She predicted that the rest of their time would end with Kushida and Ichinose discussing other trivial matters.

"Oh, no! It's not like that at all! Never mind!"

Ichinose hurriedly stopped Horikita, who was about to get up.

Then, as if to add to the flame, Kushida turned her smile to Horikita.

“There’s no need to leave, Horikita-san. Ichinose-san says this too, so let’s chat together, shall we?”

“What do you mean?”

“I think we haven’t talked enough. Is that okay?”

Kushida spoke as if she really meant what she said, even though it was in contrast with her thoughts. Ichinose also looked slightly worried, wondering if she had cut her bath short by coming here.

“I’ve decided that we’ve... Okay. I’ll stay with you for a bit.”

After agreeing, she got up and sat down on a rock to let the night breeze cool her burning body.

It was cold outside the bathtub with the snow beginning to fall, but the contrast was comfortable in its own way.

“I wanted to ask you something, Ichinose-san.”

“Hmm? What is it? Ask me anything.”

“Is there anyone you’re dating, Ichinose-san?”

“E-eeeh? What?!”

Ichinose fell into a flustered panic as she was asked a question she never expected.

“Recently, many guys in various classes have been asking me if you’re single.”

Kushida said, seemingly unaware of what was going on, but the truth was different.

In fact, she knew that Ichinose was single at the moment, and that she had feelings for Ayanokōji.

That kind of information was gathered at an early stage.

She was more well-informed than anyone else in Ichinose’s class, but she didn’t show it.

“N-no, there’s no one!”

“I see. Then is there someone you like?”

The reason behind this conversation was Kushida’s desire to dissect and gouge more information about Ayanokōji; to find out why she liked Ayanokōji so much.

She was also considering the possibility that this could eventually become a new weapon.

“No, I don’t. Really, I don’t have anything like that.”

But Ichinose didn’t admit it, denying it and sinking her face down into the bath water.

It was an action taken to hide her face, which had flushed from embarrassment and awkwardness.

Kushida was hoping that if Ichinose admitted it here, she'd be able to talk about Karuizawa or something more in-depth, but it wouldn't be that easy. So she decided to shift the topic to Horikita, who she forced to stay.

“What about you, Horikita-san? Don't you have any romantic stories like that?”

“No.”

Horikita replied without even a second's hesitation. Romance had hardly ever caught her interest.

“I see. You seem to be very popular, Horikita-san. Sudō and the others seem like they'd be friendly.”

“I don't have anybody like that. But what about you? You seem to be close with boys from other classes. I wonder if Ichinose-san is wondering about that too.”

In response to the depressing question, Horikita offered a similar rebuttal.

She quickly shifted the topic from herself, aiming to push the two of them to talk alone.

“Oh, indeed. I get asked a lot of questions about Kushida-san from boys too.”

Inwardly, Kushida clicked her tongue at Horikita and gave Ichinose a bashful smile.

“Yeah, yeah? Really? I don't know much about love either, so... I just think it's a waste to fall in love while you're still a student.”

“That can't be true?”

“Yes. I hear that most student relationships don't come to fruition. It's hard to take the plunge when it might not work out... So now I'm consciously making an effort to not fall in love.”

She thought that by telling Ichinose this story, who has a wider circle of friends than Kushida, she would be able to deter any boys who wanted to confess to her in advance.

Since entering the school, Kushida has already been confessed to more than 10 times, not limited to a single grade.

“I'm happy to be confessed to, but I'm also afraid of hurting them at the same time...”

“I see... Somehow, I think I understand...”

There was nothing more futile than a student romance in Kushida's eyes. Horikita, listening to them talk about their love lives, decided it was time to call it a day and got up to leave.

“I'd better get going.”

“What? You're leaving already?”

“I don't know anything about love.”

“I see. I don't blame you. But isn't there another reason why you want to cut this short?”

“I don't know what you're talking about.”

“If it's hot and you're at your limit, it can't be helped. As for me, I still wanted to have a chat with Horikita-san.”

“Why be so insistent?”

“Of course I am. I'm sure you feel the same, Ichinose-san?”

“Yes. I'd still like to talk to Horikita-san too, if it's possible.”

At Kushida's provocative words, Horikita returned to her sitting position.

“Then... Shall we do that?”

As the class leader, she eliminated the option of running away from Kushida's invitation.

“Are you sure you're okay? It would be a disaster if you fell over.”

“Thank you for worrying about me, but I'm worried about you too, Kushida-san. Your face looks red.”

“Maybe it's because we were talking about love.”

“Is that all? I hope you're not overworking yourself.”

Horikita's sharp gaze and Kushida's smiling glance collided with each other.

“You two look a little different from usual, don't you?”

Ichinose sensed the discomfort and tilted her head slightly.

Seeing this, Kushida's slight residual dislike and distaste for Horikita completely vanished.

“No, it's not like that. Right, Horikita-san?”

“I guess so.”

There was no need to give Ichinose, whom she saw as relatively trustworthy, any unnecessary information. Horikita decided so, too, and they continued the conversation.

For a while, they continued to talk about their love lives, and eventually they got into a lively conversation about other, more trivial matters. Horikita remained a listener throughout, enjoying the hot spring and the gentle snowfall.

Ichinose was then invited back inside by her friends who had just finished eating.

Another group of girls came to the open-air baths, and both Horikita and Kushida kept their distance and continued to play the game of patience.

After about 10 minutes, they were in a state of overheating, but...

“I think it's time for both of you to get up, don't you? Your faces are turning really red.”

As both women continued to persist until they were near their limits, Ichinose, who couldn't bear to watch any longer, came out from inside.

“Didn't you hear her, Horikita-san?”

“Aren't you the one who... didn't hear Ichinose-san's words?”

They both tried to persist even under these circumstances, but at this point, other students who had finished their meals began to appear in groups in the outdoor baths. The competition would be difficult to continue in this situation, so they read the mood and stood up at the same time.

“It was a nice bath, wasn't it?”

“It really was. It's more than enough...”

“Is something wrong with you two after all?”

Ichinose felt the strange atmosphere again, but the two left the bath as if nothing was wrong.

6

Just before 10:00 p.m., two gentle knocks sounded from the guest room door.

Watanabe heard them and quickly got up, stating that he would take care of it.

Was his initiative for our sake or for his?

“Here we are~”

Saying that, the four girls, led by Kushida, stood in front of the door.

“Hey, welcome. You’re late.”

Nervousness and anxiety, perhaps. Watanabe's movements suddenly slowed down and she fully opened the door.

“Sorry. I took a long soak in the bath, so I'm late.”

Kushida's face was indeed slightly flushed as she answered. At the same time, her hair was glossy.

It wasn't often that we got a chance to meet girls like this at night, just before bedtime. That's probably why Watanabe was having such valuable experience right now.

When the four girls entered the room, an indescribable aroma immediately spread throughout. This group of boys didn't smell bad, but it seemed like a different space now.

“Why does it smell so good...?”

“Come on, it's a mystery for sure.”

The men's baths were equipped with large shampoo and conditioner bottles made with soy milk, perhaps for commercial use. I wasn't complaining, but some aspects, such as the lather, weren't particularly great, making it seem like a relatively inexpensive product.

Normally, one would think that the same items would be placed in the women's large bath, but...

The aroma wafting from the women was clearly different from the soy milk shampoo. Or maybe they brought it on their own.

“Hey, ask them how they smell so good?”

“I'm sorry, but I can't ask that.”

Even I, who wasn't familiar with the world, understood. If I said something like that, I was sure to receive a bad reaction.

“I'm a little nervous thinking about a boy's room.” Amikura whispered uncomfortably to the other girls as she looked around the room.

“The layout of the room may be the same, but it looks strangely different.”

“After we're done talking, why don't we go to Honami's room? They're having a girls' gathering until just before lights out.”

“Really? Yeah, I'm totally fine with that.”

Unlike Kushida, who readily agreed to the meeting, Nishino refused, seemingly uninterested.

“I'll pass. I don't have any good friends there.”

Taking advantage of this, Yamamura also lowered her head and muttered.

“I think I'll pass too...”

“Yeah? I think everyone is welcome to join but, well, that's fine.”

Watanabe looked somewhat disappointed, knowing that the girls would soon be leaving.

There was still time to spare as lights-out was at 11:00 p.m., which was considered somewhat late. It was a school trip, and everyone wanted to let loose.

“This is how I feel about welcoming girls...”

Watanabe was intoxicated with ecstasy as he whispered.

“More importantly, Watanabe, you should follow up with the girls as soon as possible. Isn't this your chance to make a good impression?”

Just inviting them into the room was something that even I, Ryūen, and Kitō could do.

To leave a lasting impression, he would have to take it a step further.

“What? A follow-up? What?”

He was so impressed with the girls' arrival that he didn't seem to recognize what was happening. Having come the whole way to the men's room, the girls didn't know where to settle down.

“Um... Where should we sit?”

Because four futons had already been laid out in the Japanese-style room, spaced slightly apart by the customer service staff, we had no choice but to move closer to the edge of the room to sit on the tatami.

Deciding whether to force them to be cramped or to take other measures would show the person's aptitude.

“Huh? Anywhere would be fine, right? You don't really care whether or not it's on the futon, right?”

Watanabe said, not quite understanding, and removed two sets of blankets from the futon to prepare the space. The girls looked a little surprised, but there was no other suitable place, and Kushida showed her agreement.

The four of them each sat on the two sets of futons closest to the entrance.

“Well then, it's almost lights out, so let's get started. Where's Ryūen-kun?”

“Behind the shoji.”

If they opened the closed shoji, they would find a small table, two single-person sofas, and a small refrigerator.

Nishino, as was expected of someone from her class, opened the shoji vigorously. Ryūen seemed to be relaxing on the single-person sofa, fiddling with his cell phone.

“You heard me, didn't you? Gather around.”

“I'm fine right here. I can hear you just fine.”

“That may be true, but I'd like everyone to come here. I'm trying to build group solidarity.”

Without a hint of fear, Kushida motioned for Ryūen to come closer. Not liking Kushida's demeanor, Ryūen powered off his cell phone screen with a laugh.

“You seem to be all worked up, but you do understand your position, don't you?”

“What do you mean?”

“It means exactly how it sounds. If you don't get it, I can make you understand, can't I?”

The other students couldn't understand and accept the purpose of his checks and balances. As he was the person outside of the class who knew Kushida best, Ryūen's words were heavy.

“What are you talking about?”

Nishino, perhaps taking it as a sign that Kushida was simply arguing with him, pressed closer to Ryūen.

“Don't just say things that annoy me, get your ass over here.”

Nishino was neither frightened nor timid and was about to grab his arm and pull him up.

“Nishino, you've been opening your mouth a lot lately, haven't you?”

“I've always been like this. I just didn't get more involved than necessary until now.”

I guess she had no choice now that she was in a group, or something like that. I thought he was going to lay into her further from there, but Ryūen stood up in an annoyed manner and stepped toward the Japanese-style room. The air instantly became tense as Kitō looked at him.

Still, it was clear that, for the time being, eight people had gathered in one room for discussion.

“Is this something we should all gather here to do? We can just use our cell phones.”

Kitō, who hadn't said a word since the girls arrived, asked.

Surely it would be easy to notify everyone if we created a group on a messaging app.

“It seems that the other groups are making these decisions through face to face discussions.”

“Heh, that's great, Kushida-chan.”

Watanabe gave an exaggerated nod, as if impressed by her informed nature, and sat down between me and Yamamura.

Perhaps alarmed by the unexpected approach of a boy, Yamamura took a half-step backward in a hurry, as if to get away from Watanabe.

“Oh, my bad Yamamura. There you go.”

“No, don't worry about it.”

Apart from this trivial exchange, there was still a strong sense of tension from Ryūen's confrontation.

“Forget other people. There is a certain way of doing things here.”

Kitō was probably worried about Ryūen's presence. It was clear that he feared they wouldn't be able to have a proper discussion.

“I think it's important to have a face-to-face meeting. Everyone wants to hear what the others are really thinking.”

Kushida, however, was not ready to back down, replying that there were many things that couldn't be understood through texting.

Kushida may not want to step on Ryūen's landmines, but she had her own position to protect. If Kushida, on the surface, decided that there was no backing down here, she'll just push forward.

“Well then, let me get right to the point... About the free time after tomorrow...”

“I forgot to mention that there's one thing we need to agree on first.”

Ryūen looked around the Japanese-style room where the futon was laid out and opened his mouth.

“I have no intention of sleeping side by side with you guys, but even so, I can't say that in this limited space. I'll sleep here.” He looked at the futon at the far end of the room.

It was the ideal position, where no one could get between you and the bedding, and where you wouldn't be disturbed if someone woke up in the middle of the night to use the bathroom or something similar.

We certainly hadn't decided who was going to sleep where yet, but is this something that had to be decided now?

I thought it would be better to decide after the girls leave. Did he simply not read the room, or did he say that now on purpose?

Considering Ryūen's personality and actions, I can only feel it's the latter. But what about the others around us?

It was clearly an out-of-place remark, and the others seemed to think it was nothing more than selfishness.

“You don't have any objections, do you?”

He took one look at Kitō and Watanabe to make sure, and then said in a slightly more forceful tone.

“I... Well, I don't care where I sleep.”

Watanabe agreed, like a frog staring at a snake.

Now, what should I say?

While I was thinking, Ryūen had already shifted his gaze away from me.

“Hey, Kitō. If you have something to say, don't hesitate to say it, okay?”

He seemed to think that the only one who would argue was Kitō.

“I don't approve.”

His rebuttal seemed to symbolize that.

“Oh?”

He told him not to hold back, but Ryūen tilted his head as if he was dissatisfied with the refusal.

“I won't approve of an unbiased approach. Moreover, it's not something we should be discussing now. Can't you even understand that?”

“I don't know. I don't remember allowing you such a veto.”

“I'm free to speak when, where, and how I want.”

Kitō didn't show any signs of backing down, entering a fighting stance instead.

“Well, well, well, calm down, Kitō. How about I give you a place to sleep?”

“No.”

“Uh...”

Watanabe was about to get up and stop him when he was met with a powerful glare.

With his raw looks, Kitō surpassed Ryūen in terms of intensity and power.

“I have no intention of letting this man's irrationality pass.”

“Wait, hey boys. That's not what we're talking about right now.”

Amikura tried to intervene, but Nishino stopped her by pulling her yukata's sleeve. Shaking her head from side to side, she silently warned her not to interrupt.

“I'll say it again and again if I have to, but I'm not going to give it up without a fight.”

“What? So you're saying you want to compete for this place with me?”

“You want violence? I can make it happen, but you'll have to lie here for the rest of the trip.”

Kushida had a troubled look on her face, I looked into her eyes and I can see she's worried we might get into deathly amounts of trouble.

“Kuku, then let's do it. You guys want to compete for this place as well?”

“I'll pass... Like I said before, I don't care where I sleep.”

Personally, I'd rather be on the edge than sandwiched in between, but I don't want to cause trouble.

Whether Ryūen or Kitō won, as soon as one of them took the edge, they wouldn't have to lie next to each other. It was more likely that Watanabe or I would

be in between them as a buffer.

“I’ll pass too. You can compete and decide as you like. But if you two want that end, I’ll let you take the spot you want before Watanabe and me from the remaining three, okay? And please don’t use violence to decide.”

If we didn’t assert our natural rights, we would have another dispute later. It seems that both parties had the same preferred spot for the futon, and Watanabe and I were free to choose from the available spots afterwards.

I also had to strongly emphasize the point of violence, otherwise, we would draw too much attention. I heard that the school would be relentless in imposing restrictions on groups that cause trouble. It would be a shame if we were stuck in the inn during the school trip, even if it was pretty luxurious.

“As for me, I prefer fistfights because they’re easier to understand, but I guess that’s not going to happen. At any rate, I’m glad to see that you’re not afraid of violence.”

“Thanks, Ayanokōji, for saying what you did.”

“No, I didn’t say anything important.”

“That’s not true. I didn’t say anything. At least you did. You can sleep on the edge of the bed.”

I wonder if the students in Ichinose’s class were fundamentally made up of goodness. He gave up the end of the room even though I didn’t ask him to do so. The third to choose was the one who lost the game. The third one to lose the game was decided by me sleeping on the end closest to the entrance.

“I’ve got to build up a little tolerance too.”

Apparently, one of his reasons for giving it up was for personal reasons. I don’t think it’ll be too stimulating to be sandwiched between Ryūen and Kitō, though.

“If it’s a school trip, this is the only way to go about it, isn’t there?”

Before I knew it, a pillow was clutched in Ryūen’s hand.

“I don’t have to explain the rules, do I, Kitō?”

“Of course not.”

“What? What are you doing with the pillow?”

I tilted my head, not knowing what was waiting for me at the end of the exchange.

“Well, there’s only one way to combine a school trip and a pillow, isn’t there?”

Only one? I had no idea... However, all the others seemed to understand, and Kushida quickly got up.

“Well, I’ll be the judge then, right? It would be better to settle this in a fair way.”

Kushida, who seemed to regret being in the wrong place, offered.

“You're so disciplined, even at a time like this, aren't you, Kushida-chan?”
I'd like to get the real explanation out of her, but there were other girls nearby, as well as Watanabe.

Rather than that, I was more interested to see what he would do with the pillow.

“I'll allow you the first move.”

“Don't do that, you don't want to lose without a single throw. Come at me without regrets, Ryūen.”

Ryūen laughed as he bounced the pillow on his hand.

“Then I'll kill you without mercy, Kitō!”

Saying this, Ryūen took a big swing and threw the pillow at him, using it as a ball. The pillow filled with buckwheat chaff attacked Kitō at high speed.

Even though there was some distance between them, the pillow was thrown with such intensity it would be hard to miss. However...

Kitō calmly and surely caught the pillow.

“I'll kill you...!”

This time, Kitō himself swung and threw back a pillow with equal power. On the other hand, Ryūen also caught the pillow and immediately shifted into a throwing position.

“Kukuku! I'm going to show you true pain!”

The pillow was returned again.

“This is...”

“It's a pillow fight. Ayanokōji-kun, haven't you ever done this before? I thought that all the boys did this in their elementary and junior high school trips.”

That was new to me. No one tossed pillows at last year's camp, either.

“Darkness ball!” Kitō bellowed.

“Eat him, you ravenous serpent!” Ryūen screamed.

Darkness, serpents, and other things had been shouted to change that pillow into various other things.

“This is still... a pillow fight, right?” Amikura muttered as she looked at the pillows flying left and right.

Rather than a pillow-throwing contest, this was a one-on-one killing game... in which others were not allowed to participate. The deathmatch continued for several minutes with no signs of a winner. Neither side was exhausted, and it looked as if the long battle would only continue.

However, we learned that there were other things to worry about as well.

“Is that pillow going to be okay after being thrown so hard for so long? It's already very tattered, isn't it?”

Kushida calmly muttered, and everyone's eyes were drawn to the pillows.



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I didn't need to explain, but a pillow isn't a tool to be thrown. There was no way the pillows wouldn't accumulate damage, as they weren't throwing it at each other lightly, but rather continuing to catch and throw a series of stiff fastballs without restricting their power.

“Come to think of it, whose pillow is that?”

At Watanabe's comment, we suddenly checked the futons on the floor. Of the four futons, the pillow was missing from the one at the end that Watanabe had given me.

“Is that... Mine?”

What should've been on my futon wasn't there. Right now, it looked as if Kitō was clutching it in his hands and infusing more dark power into it than ever before. I could feel the pillow screaming.

“I'm going to have nightmares if I sleep on that pillow.”

No, to begin with, there was no guarantee that the pillow would maintain its shape, which was terrifying. Whichever side won, I hope my pillow returned in one piece.

“Hnnnnn!!!”

The pillow was filled with an unprecedentedly dense killing intent. Perhaps because Kitō's thick fingers had dug into it so forcefully, it burst open the moment it left his hand. The cloth was torn, and the buckwheat straws inside scattered throughout the room.

The sound of the buckwheat straws flying through the air caused everyone to fall silent. The pillow that was supposed to gently support my head had met a miserable end.

The pillow... I strongly wished for its safety, but it didn't come back intact...

I would like to express my condolences to the victims who were scattered so cruelly on the battlefield.

“I can't help but think that boys are really just children, aren't they?”

The two boys, without seeming to care, reached for the new pillow at hand, whereupon Nishino raised her voice.

“You know, we don't have time for this. We're busy, so can't we discuss things later? It's annoying.”

Ryūen ignored the warning and was about to continue, but Kitō seemed to be different. He sat there silently and decided to stop. His heated thoughts cooled and he sensed the frustration in his surroundings.

“Does that mean you've lost, Kitō?”

“I'm not going to continue if I'm bothering others.”

He was so quick to draw back, which was hard to imagine from the

atmosphere he usually radiated. Well, if this was going to be the result, I wish he hadn't done it from the beginning.

At least the sacrifice of the pillow, its straws scattered in cold blood, could've been avoided.

“Well, for now, let's just finish cleaning up, and then we can start talking.” With the help of all the boys, except Ryūen, and all the girls, we succeeded in collecting the pillow's remnants without spending much time.

We'll have to get a new pillow from the innkeepers later. I'll have to decide whether or not to tell the truth. I collected the scattered buckwheat straws and placed them in a clear plastic bag set in the trash, and began to discuss the original topic.

“We're free to go anywhere as long as we return to the ryokan by 19:00, the final time for dinner, right?”

First, as a matter of course, Kushida began speaking for the group.

“Yes. So it's really like a free day.”

Amikura immediately joined the conversation.

“I guess we could take a train or a bus and go out to some extent, but what should we do...? Nishino-san, do you have any ideas about where you want to go?”

“I'm thinking about skiing. I've only been practicing and haven't done enough actual skiing yet, and there's the resort at the corner of the mountain.”

“I agree with Nishino.”

We just learned to ski, and it would be a shame to let it end after only half a day or so.

Kitō silently raised his hand in agreement.

“There are quite a few people who want to ski. What about Watanabe-kun and Yamamura-san?”

“I don't have any objections either. We'll be in the city on the third day, too, so isn't it fine?”

“I'm okay with anything.”

Yamamura, who still couldn't ski, didn't seem to have any particular aversion to it. Was she just trying to fit in with her surroundings, or did she simply want to become a better skier?

Her emotions didn't seem to suggest that, though.

“How about you, Mako-chan?”

“Ummm. I'm not that good at skiing, so I wouldn't go so far as to say I'm happy, but if everyone else is skiing, that's fine. We're a group.”

With that, she showed her total willingness to concede.

Kushida didn't offer her own opinion, but looked at Ryūen, who was sitting on the single-person sofa.

“What about you, Ryūen-kun?”

“Suit yourself.”

He seemed to have no particular argument and simply relinquished his right to speak.

The group was relieved that Ryūen, the most troublesome person in the group, made that decision. It was more accurate to think that Ryūen was also intending on enjoying skiing rather than being uninterested in going anywhere.

Chapter 3: School Trip: Second Day

IT WAS THE morning of the second day of our school trip. After breakfast and getting dressed, we were relaxing in our room until the bus left for the ski resort.

Watanabe and I casually turned on the TV. On the screen, people were reading out a summary of this morning's news, and making casual comments.

After a bit of this, the atmosphere changed when the program moved on to a special, on kittens. Ryūen, who was in the same room, had already taken his place on the one-seat sofa, and Kitō was browsing through a stack of magazines that the ryokan were available for free. They all seemed to have fashion in common.

“It's so disturbing to see that he's just reading a book and it looks so menacing... It's like he's reading a murder manual.”

Watanabe whispered this in my ear. He probably thought no one would hear, but Kitō's sharp eyes instantly glared at Watanabe. Perhaps intimidated by this, he averted his gaze as he hid in my shadow.

“He's definitely a scary guy, right? Right?”

He shook me by the shoulders, but, if possible, I wanted to concentrate on the cat special on TV.

“Hey, Kitō. You got a little indigestion from yesterday's pillow fight, didn't you? Let's have another game today.”

As if to bring a storm into this peaceful morning, Ryūen made a proposal to Kitō. Needless to say, this wasn't a welcome proposal for Watanabe and I.

“You fool. Do you wish to embarrass yourself? If you want to regret it, I won't stop you.”

“Well, then, let me suggest something.”

“What kind of game do you want?”

“The skiing we're going to do sounds good, doesn't it?”

It seemed that he wanted a simple competition to see who would finish first. Although Kitō may not be a beginner, yesterday at least made it clear that Ryūen's skills were superior.

There was no need for Kitō to go out of his way to play along with Ryūen's strategy of trying to drag him into his own ring. However, Kitō firmly closed the magazine with the same energy.

“You think you can win with skis? I'll crush your confidence.”

He seemed to accept the challenge and refused to show any signs of backing down.

“I'm not going to let you win”

“Um guys... can we not make it a competition?”

Watanabe's voice was so low that a child might have said, “Ants are talking!”

While we were whispering back and forth, the two sides were heating up. Then Kitō stood up, curled up a borrowed magazine in his hand, approached Ryūen and thrust the tip of the magazine at him as if it were the tip of a sword.

“If you lose, you'll be as quiet as a cat during this trip.”

He demanded, perhaps unknowingly inspired by the TV special on cats.

“Oh? I'm already more mature than you, if you ask me.”

With a snap, he brushed the tip of the magazine away with his arm.

I'd just like to see this feature on cats in peace. I urged them to keep their distance and avoid struggling.

“You've got some nerve, Ayanokōji, even though the brunt of the trouble might come your way.”

I don't think so. I'm not going to let them take advantage of me.

“Anyway, now that things have quieted down, I'm going to continue on...”

Those were my intentions, but before I knew it, the cat had disappeared from the TV screen. It seemed that I hadn't had much time to watch, as it was over in a few minutes.

“I'm sorry to see that, Ayanokōji. You like cats, don't you?”

“No, not really.”

“You didn't like the feature?”

“I just wanted to see it for some reason, but I don't have any special attachment to cats as an animal.”

I would've felt the same way had this been a dog feature or a hippopotamus feature. The program was a cheerful topic of conversation for a while, but then breaking news was presented instead.

The news showed that after a long period of recuperation, former Secretary-General Naona Ee had passed away at a Tokyo hospital. From the Prime Minister's Office, Prime Minister Kijima Onikijima had something to say...

With numerous flashes, a man with a stern expression began to speak.

“‘Let the man be with you, and the horse with you.’ These words were given to me by Dr. Naoe shortly after I met him.”

Just as the Prime Minister began talking about the deceased, the screen darkened. It was time for the bus.

Kitō, holding the remote control with his index finger on the power button, called out.

“Come on, let's go, Ayanokōji.”

I'm going to enjoy skiing, but I'm a little concerned about the competition between the two of them.

1

We came outside, but there was a little trouble waiting for us. We heard that the bus was stuck in a traffic jam and would be delayed about 10 minutes. There were many students waiting for the bus, and when I turned around, the front porch was overflowing with people.

“It's cold, but I guess we have no choice but to wait outside.”

Watanabe exhaled a white breath and gloomily looked up at the sky. It was unfortunate that we went outside a little earlier than the other students, but it couldn't be helped. Even if we went all the way back to our rooms, we wouldn't be able to relax for more than five minutes. We, the sixth group, waited under the shelter of the roof for the bus to come.

“Hey, hey, since it's a special occasion, why don't we all build a snowman?” Amikura suggested to the group, perhaps to make the most of the wait.

“That sounds fun. Why don't we make one with Nishino-san and Yamamura-san?”
“...Well, okay.”

Nishino was expected to refuse this kind of thing, but surprisingly, she easily gave in.

“What about Yamamura-san?”

“No, I'm... Not interested.”

As expected, she declined, albeit somewhat modestly.

The girls moved to a spot out of the way and began to gather up the fallen snow.

Apparently, they had intended not to make a small snowman, but a reasonably large one.

“Hey, Ryūen-kun, why don't you come over here and make a snowman with us? I think it would be fun.”

Knowing that he would never take her up on her suggestion, Kushida ostensibly appealed to his good heart and invited Ryūen to join them. The students around her were also watching the development with concern, perhaps because they couldn't imagine Ryūen building a snowman with enthusiasm.

This remark was definitely payback for yesterday.

If he made any careless remarks, she was determined to take advantage of the situation.

“I thought that some checks and balances would make her quieter, but I guess I misread her.”

Ryūen muttered to himself.

It was true that Kushida, before her identity became known to her classmates, might've tolerated the situation.

He may have felt a strange sense of suspicion, but there was no way he could solve the mystery. I can't pass on information that the rest of the classes don't know, such as what transpired during the Unanimous Vote Special Exam.

Needless to say, there was no way that Ryūen would take up Kushida's offer. He didn't react to the invitation and turned his head.

On the other hand, there were those who continued to quietly gaze at the snowman as it was being built.

It was Yamamura, who had been gradually distancing herself from us without being noticed.

“Hah...”

While observing the snowman being made by Kushida, she exhaled coldly into her hands.

“Hah!”

Kushida and the others building the snowman were naturally wearing warm gloves.

Looking around, none of the students outside except for Yamamura had bare hands.

It was only natural. In this cold weather, they wouldn't go bare-handed for an extensive period of time unless they had a special reason to.

I remember Yamamura was wearing gloves before yesterday's skiing lesson.

Even if she could rent ski gloves, why wouldn't she bring gloves with her on the way to the ski resort anyway?

If she forgot them, she could just go back to get them, so maybe there was a reason for their absence.

She looked dazed and stared out, repeatedly exhaling. I was curious about the mountain village, but more and more students were beginning to come out while we waited for the bus.

“It's snowing all over, isn't it?”

The owner of the familiar voice was Sakayanagi Arisu, a member of the fourth group. She should be with Hondō and Onodera from Horikita's class. As I recalled this, students continued to show up, the snow continuing to shock them. Since Sakayanagi couldn't ski, she was probably going to a sightseeing spot.

We didn't get particularly involved with the members of the sixth group, and all of Sakayanagi's group members seemed to be together.

Soon, the bus heading to the city center arrived, before the others heading to the ski resort.

The teacher leading the way gave the order to get on, and the students began boarding one by one.

Sakayanagi walked with her cane on the unfamiliar snow-covered road.

As I watched, I wondered if she was in danger.

Perhaps my prediction came true because Sakayanagi slipped and fell on her buttocks.

Fortunately, she wasn't in pain as the snow seemed to cushion the impact. "Are you okay...?"

Tokitō, a Class C student assigned to the same Group 4, who was walking slightly behind me, rushed up to her.

He seemed to hesitate for a moment, but then extended his hand.

"Thank you, Tokitō-kun."

She grabbed the hand that was being held out to her as she thanked him a little shyly.

It would be easy to forcefully pull the petite Sakayanagi up, but Tokitō did so carefully and slowly.

Despite his stern face, he was surprisingly sensitive and considerate in his help.

"Don't push yourself. You have a bad leg..."

"I'm sorry. Fortunately the snow was soft and it didn't hurt."

"So there's no problem...?"

Sakayanagi usually employed relentless strategy as the class leader, but the other classes' group members must've felt a vastly different impression.

Grabbing her cane, Sakayanagi got up and thanked him once more.

"Thank you for your help."

"Nothing, it's... It's..., I mean, I'm glad it didn't turn out to be a big deal."

Embarrassed, he shifted his gaze, unable to look directly at Sakayanagi.

"I thought Tokitō-kun was a much scarier person."

"Eh? Me? ...No, I don't know."

Sakayanagi stopped to talk. It was an exchange that seemed to show the change in their relationship.

"Because you usually seem to walk with a scary look plastered on your face when we pass each other in the hallway."

"Hey, how do you even know me?"

When asked this, Sakayanagi replied without pause and with a smile on her face.

"Because we are both second-year students. I know Tokitō-kun very well."

If they were an ordinary boy and girl in an ordinary high school, this would be a scene that would likely cause misunderstandings. However, behind that smile, there was always the possibility that Sakayanagi's wits and tricks were at play.

In some cases, even falling down may have been part of the calculation.

Sakayanagi and Tokitō walked side by side to the bus doorway, where he let Sakayanagi board first. The only other person who might be interested in this exchange was Ryūen, who was staring at them with great curiosity. Whether or not

there was an underlying reason behind this, it was clear that those who normally had no contact with each other were gradually beginning to close the distance between them.



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The delayed buses to the ski resort also arrived, replacing the buses to the city center.

2

After getting off the ski resort bus, the eight of us decided to walk around the area instead of immediately entering the resort.

This wasn't planned; it was Amikura's idea, who noticed several souvenir shops around the area from the bus.

A 20 or 30-minute detour wouldn't make much of a difference.

"Ummm... it's cold in Hokkaido this morning, isn't it? It was warmer in the bus, so I can feel the temperature difference even more."

Saying so, Kushida rubbed her gloves together, her body shivering.

"Yes, this weather is surprising at the end of November. It's weird that there's snow on the ground."

"If you're going to look around, get on with it. But I'm sure most of them aren't open yet."

Ryūen called out to the group that was standing still.

The time was still just past 9:15.

The ski resort opens at 9:30, so most of the stores in the area were still closed.

It seems that Ryūen intended to just enjoy skiing for the day, so he wanted to head there and wait.

Among the few stores that were already open, there was an unusual apparel store, and for some reason, Kitō walked in and began to stare at the clothes. There were some very fancy and unusual clothes on display. Did he find anything he liked?

Just as I thought, he replaced the clothes he had picked up and began rummaging through another set of clothes.

"By the way, Kitō's feet are so big. They look like a snowman's footprint, man."

Watanabe looked at the snowy footprints leading up to the apparel store and compared them to his own, as if impressed.

Kitō was certainly tall, but even without taking that into account, it seemed certain that his feet are quite large.

"Let's all go browse more shops."

Amikura, the one who proposed the idea, called out to everyone and started walking away, as if time was of the essence.

Kushida immediately accepted Amikura's invitation, but Yamamura refused, apparently intending on staying behind.

Watanabe and Nishino also seemed to have decided to walk around by themselves.

“Yamamura-san? Aren't you going?”

“...Ah, I'll stay... Please don't mind me.”

Only Ryūen, Yamamura and I remained at this spot.

I really wanted to browse with Amikura and the others, but since they didn't invite me to go with them, I missed out on that chance.

What should I do now? I could look around by myself like Watanabe and the others...

Since Yamamura declined the invitation, she must be planning to stay here and wait for everyone to return.

If I left, I would be leaving her alone with Ryūen. It would've been fine if the two of them were on good terms, but they had never interacted with each other before.

There was no prospect of them getting along with each other; it would be a terrible idea to leave them alone.

Therefore, unless Yamamura or Ryūen started to act alone, it would be necessary to stay behind until then, despite it being frustrating.

“...”

Yamamura shuddered as she watched Amikura and the others, whose backs were getting smaller and smaller.

The cause for her shivers was clearly her lack of gloves which she normally kept hidden in her coat. It was certain that she came here without gloves. So, should I lend her mine?

But if she refused, it might make things a little awkward.

The sixth group, including Kitō and the others, had already left, leaving just the three of us in a quiet situation.

Yamamura seemed to be holding back her trembling as much as she could, but she still couldn't hide it.

“Hey, Yamamura, give me your hand.”

“What...!?”

As I continued to wonder whether I should call out to her or not, Ryūen instructed Yamamura, who was standing there with her hand in the inside pocket of her coat, in a harsh tone.

Apparently, Ryūen also noticed Yamamura's shivering and the unnaturalness of her hands remaining in her coat. He thought her cold hands would come out, but Yamamura averted her gaze and...

“I don't want to.”

She said no firmly, albeit in a small voice.

“Oh?”

“I don't want to pull them out. It's too cold.”

Without mentioning whether or not she had gloves, she stated her reason. I could feel the cold, Hokkaido wind even through my gloves. It was definitely warmer to have your hands inside your coat if you didn't have gloves.

I thought the conversation would end here, but Ryūen stepped onto the snow-covered road and invaded Yamamura's personal space.

Then he grabbed her right arm and forcibly pulled it out of her pocket.
“Ah——”

After confirming that she was not wearing gloves directly, Ryūen let go of her arm and Yamamura hurriedly moved to hide her hands inside her coat.

“Well, that must be cold. Where are your gloves?”

Ryūen forcefully proved that she was bare-handed, but Yamamura didn't answer.

She turned her back as if asking to be left alone.

“You're probably not even good at skiing to begin with but you're not gonna wear gloves on top of that?”

Ryūen's point was valid. As a beginner, Yamamura wasn't even halfway decent at skiing yet.

If her hands were so cold that they were useless, she wouldn't make any progress. On the contrary, it would only increase the risk of falling.

“If you get into a lot of trouble and cause a commotion, my skiing time will be cancelled. Can you take responsibility?”

The emphasis on his own skiing sounded like a mixture of selfishness and clumsy kindness, typical of Ryūen.

“No, that's...”

Yamamura seemed unable to retort to an issue that wasn't merely about feelings.

“So. Where are your gloves?”

“I forgot...”

“Ha, I guess there are dumbasses like that.”

Not many people would forget their gloves in this cold weather.

Laughing through his nose, Ryūen looked down at his own gloves.

I didn't think he was going to lend his own gloves for Yamamura's sake——.

“Oi, Ayanokōji, lend her your gloves.”

“...Mine?”

He didn't even show any kindness yet he imposed demands on me.

“I'm a skiing novice too, you know?”

“You'd have no problem if you got hurt, right?”

I'm not quite sure I understood the logic behind it, but...

Unfortunately, there were no stores open around here that sold gloves. I guess I'll have to lend them out for the sake of the trip. There may be special

gloves in the ski resort, but even 10 or 15 minutes of warmth would make a difference.

“No, that's okay. I'm fine.”

Yamamura said that and exhaled as she moved away.

“You shouldn't do that. The cold causes vasoconstriction. Your body's shivering because your muscles are trying to raise your body temperature. It might be dangerous to start skiing in that condition. Isn't it extremely frustrating that Ryūen is right?”

“That's...”

I half forcefully pushed the gloves I took off to Yamamura.

“But... Ayanokōji-kun?”

“I'm fine, don't worry about it.”

I don't have a special tolerance for the cold, but as Ryūen said, if I try to endure it, it won't be a problem.

“I'm sorry...”

While dreading it, Yamamura wore the large pair of gloves with her hands shaking slightly.

Then she slipped her hands back into her coat.

They will remain cold for a while, but after a few minutes, it'll improve.

“You'll have to buy a new pair of gloves in your size later.”

“Yes, you're right. Um, when we get to the ski resort, please let me reimburse you for the gloves.”

“Reimburse?”

“I'd feel bad giving them back to you... after I wore them. They're dirty.”

“They're not dirty. No, even if you fell and stained them, I don't really mind, as long as you return them as they are, that's fine.”

“That's not what I mean. I'll get them dirty by wearing them ...”

Is this a germaphobe's way of thinking? No, but Yamamura wore the gloves without resistance, albeit reservedly. That's a way of thinking I don't quite understand.

“I would still like to reimburse you.”

When it comes to reimbursement for the gloves, I don't think she would blatantly choose the cheapest ones and return them.

I'd be forcing a pricey expense on her for an action that didn't require reimbursement.

“It's just spending some extra private points. You don't have to worry about that.”

“It's weird, isn't it?”

I still say something as if I don't understand it.

Why would Yamamura wear them and why would it make her feel uncomfortable?

Even if it hadn't been Yamamura, I would've felt the same way.

"It's okay. It would be worse to be compensated due to being overly concerned about it."

I used a slightly stronger statement to let her know that I was confused.

"So, at least allow me to thank you in some other way."

I didn't think a thank-you was necessary, but maybe Yamamura would feel better if she did something.

If she's this insistent, I should provide a way for her to be satisfied.

"Then may I ask you one question in lieu of a thank you?"

"...Yes?"

"Was there a reason you didn't have your gloves since the wait for the bus in the morning?"

"I forgot, that's all."

I knew she hadn't left them unintentionally.

"You had plenty of time to go back and get them. Or are you saying you weren't cold?"

I asked, pushing further towards what had been bothering me.

"...That kind of thing, because it wasn't the right mood..."

"Mood?"

"The kind of mood that is hard to get through, sort of."

It's true that the lobby was crowded with students, but I'm not sure if it was the atmosphere that made it difficult to return.

No, that's just how I felt, but Yamamura might not have necessarily felt the same way. Although the exchange only lasted a few minutes, I was able to understand the student Yamamura a bit more.

And that could be intriguing.

"Who do you usually hang out with, Yamamura?"

What kind of friends do these types of students make? Are they the same quiet kids, or are they in a circle of popular kids like Kushida who welcome everyone? Or is she a strong puller?

Yamamura, however, didn't immediately answer these questions. Her expression showed no significant change, but she looked slightly uncomfortable as she narrowed her eyes and turned away.

"No one really. I usually spend most of my time alone."

"Alone? I don't think a Class A student would leave one person alone."

"I have such a weak presence that... you probably wouldn't even notice that I'm alone. It's an everyday occurrence, so I'm not particularly concerned about it."

She did indeed lack presence.

I myself would be classified as someone similar.

However, in the case of Yamamura and I, it was highly likely that our personalities were completely different.

If Yamamura was cold, there was no way Amikura would ignore it if she noticed.

Even Kushida, who was always concerned about other people's reactions, seems to have become desensitized to Yamamura's weak presence.

Well, if Yamamura was actually almost invisible, like a shadow, I don't think anyone would have paid attention when she went back to get her gloves.

The thinness of the shadow. If we analyze it objectively, we can grasp its true nature to some extent.

“Do you like yourself, Yamamura?”

“I don't like myself at all. It's impossible.”

Yamamura answered honestly, perhaps out of obligation for having been lent gloves.

The thing she wanted to hide was herself, and that was one of the first factors that left her overshadowed.

If you didn't want to reveal yourself, if you didn't want to appeal to others, you would inevitably act inconspicuously.

Even in a discussion, they would hide behind someone and try to avoid being recognized.

It was similar to wearing black clothes in the middle of the night.

Also, because they don't move unnecessarily, they are rarely noticed when in view.

It's as if they have less presence than they should.

Furthermore, from what I have seen, Yamamura seems to be more wary of people than others.

In other words, she was afraid of other people and avoided asserting herself as much as possible.

The combination of these factors resulted in the birth of Yamamura, a shadowy and unrecognizable student. The problem was that even if the cause was known, there was no immediate solution.

I, who didn't usually interact with Yamamura, would only make her more wary of me. It would be easier to reach her if there was someone close enough for her to trust.

Eventually, our conversation ended here and we went silent.

About 10 minutes later, just before the doors opened, everyone returned.

“So how should we divide ourselves up? We don't all have to ski together, right?”

Even though acting as a group was mandatory, it didn't mean we had to match every detail. There was a mix of beginners and advanced skiers, and it would be difficult or even bothersome if everyone had to fit in with one or the other.

The key was balance. Whether or not the people around you would judge it as reasonable when they see it.

The team division would have to be considered starting with the least technically skilled of the eight.

“Yamamura and I are confirmed for the beginner course. I don't mind if the two of us ski together.”

There was a gentle beginner course at the bottom of the ski area, so it was definite that both of them would ski there. Yamamura quickly agreed to Watanabe's offer.

“I think it would be better if someone who can ski to follow Yamamura-san and the others. If you want, I can...”

“Oh, that's okay, Kushida-san. I'll do it in the beginner's area.”

“What? Is that okay?”

“Don't worry about it, you can go ahead and ski. Even if you can ski, the advanced course is a bit scary.”

Amikura offered to follow Yamamura and the others, even though she was at the level where she could ski normally.

“I'm not sure about the advanced course either... so I'll do that.”

Nishino answered and told the others at the same time, as if she had also planned to do so from the beginning.

Unexpectedly, we agreed to split into groups of four people each and ski different courses.

“If you want to ski on the intermediate or higher courses, let me know anytime.”

In case Nishino and Amikura weren't willing to put up with it, Kushida added, “I'll be there to support you.”

“Well, lunch is at noon. Let's all meet up at the restaurant.”

As the group began to move toward the entrance of the ski resort, an unfamiliar sound, the beating of horses' hooves, began to fill the air.

Kōenji happened to be the rider.

The students in the other classes were truly astonished, and even the devil himself seemed to be a little taken aback.

It was an understandable reaction for students who hadn't known Kōenji for very long.

“Sir,——! You aren't on the course...!”

Immediately after, we saw several panicked staff members in the distance, shouting as they chased after him.

“What was that...?”

“That's amazing, isn't it...?”

Stunned, Nishino stared at Kōenji, and her figure seemed to shrink.

“What is this? I've never seen anything like this before, but I'm not surprised.”

Kushida said this so that only I could hear.

“As classmates, we're used to seeing Kōenji's outlandish behavior...”

Strangely, I felt it wasn't surprising that something like what just happened would happen with Koenji.

Familiarity, to put it bluntly.

3

We split up to change our clothes, got ready, and met at the rendezvous point.

We moved to the front of the lift in a car with myself, Kushida, Ryūen, and Kitō.

We decided to board the two-person lift in the combination of me and Ryūen, and Kushida, and Kitō.

We decided that this combination would be the least likely to cause trouble.

To be on the safe side, we let Kushida and Kitō go first and put a couple of pairs between us before getting on the lift.

By doing this, we also aimed to avoid a standoff on the lift.

“Can't you and Kitō get along a little better?”

“That's impossible. If Kitō insists on it though, that's a different story.”

Staring at the snowy mountains, Ryūen replied as if to throw up.

“So you're saying there's not much hope. If that's the case, so be it, but it's a rare chance. Kitō seems to have gained some trust from Sakayanagi. I thought you might be thinking of using this as an opportunity to get into their pocket. In some cases, you might be able to make an ally of him.”

Ryūen, sitting beside me, thought that this school trip was mainly about gathering information, and he wasn't wrong. In fact, it was likely that Sakayanagi thought something similar.

“Kitō's appearance ain't completely human, but he seems to be full of loyalty. Besides, Sakayanagi was naturally wary of me when he formed a group with me. A bad negotiation would be counterproductive.”

“You're rather pragmatic, aren't you?”

So far, I had little interaction with Kitō, and I still didn't know anything about him in detail.

However, we could strongly sense from his attitude that he thoroughly disliked Ryūen and that he was trying to protect Class A together with Sakayanagi. I hadn't heard of any problematic behavior from Kitō himself. If he carelessly negotiated to bring him into his side, it would be like asking for information to be passed down the tubes.

“Besides, the only personnel we needed from Class A was Katsuragi. Kitō and Hashimoto are good enough as small fries, but not good enough to be our pawns. It's not worth the risk.”

That seemed to be the reason why they treated Kitō and Hashimoto with continued hostility instead of a friendly manner.

While he acknowledged Kitō and the others, he seems to give special recognition to Katsuragi by far.

The lift arrived and we got off at the advanced course.

Kitō, who was waiting ahead of us, called Ryūen to the starting point with a glance.

He said he wouldn't waste any time and got straight into the race down the hill.

“Hey, give the signal.”

Ryūen instructed Kushida and ordered her to count for the start.

“Both of you, be careful.”

Kushida raised her hand and began the countdown for the start. They were a few meters away from each other and poised to start skiing. Who would be the winner?

“Start!”

The moment Kushida lowered her hand, they both got off to a good start at nearly the same time.

“Let's go after them, shall we?”

“Oh, are you sure? I'm not sure I can keep up with you....”

“Well then, you can slowly catch up to us.”

After a few seconds, Kushida and I started to slide down the slope.

Ryūen and Kitō were battling back and forth, going with the flow.

They skied down the slope at high speeds, arcing beautifully to the right and left.

My technique, which was still incomplete yesterday, began to improve with their example.

A longer, more advanced course would allow me to learn more in-depth and deliberately.

Apart from that, the battle between Ryūen and Kitō was almost even.

I thought one of them would pull ahead sooner than the other, but it was pretty much a dead heat. As far as I could tell, there wasn't much difference in technique, and they were equally competitive. Even after the halfway point of the course, there was still no sign of a decisive advantage. The two skiers were still tangled up, and just as the race was coming to a close, the horizontal distance they had maintained between each other began to close. It resulted in a dangerous situation.

The two skiers were now at risk of colliding with each other due to the overlap in course positioning.

No, this wasn't a mere coincidence.

It should be considered a warning, as though they were suggesting that it'll still be a victory even if you tackle your opponent and make them fall.

I copied both of their moves and accelerated, absorbing almost all of their techniques.

“Die, Kitō!”

“Get lost, Ryūen!”

I sensed the delayed sound of such voices, and just before they were about to collide, I forcefully inserted myself in the small gap between the two.

The intrusion of a third party caused the two to scatter to the left and right in a panic.

Both sides glared at me, but I succeeded in forcing them to keep their distance.

After skiing down the advanced course in one go, Ryūen and the others stopped slightly ahead of me.

Ryūen and Kitō immediately turned around and approached on foot.

“Why did you interrupt us?”

The two men were about to grab me with an angry tone.

“Because I thought it was dangerous,” I said. “You got overzealous and tried to win in something other than skiing.”

“A match is a match in any form. Ryūen knew that.”

“It doesn't matter if the opponent understands it or not, that's not a skiing match.”

After a round of complaints, Kitō glared at Ryūen and then skied away.

He seemed to feel that the atmosphere had dissipated, that they would compete later.

At that time, Kushida also came down the slope and arrived at our place.

“The three of you are too fast, or rather, Ayanokōji-kun was quite abnormal...!”

Ryūen also approached with a disgruntled look on his face as he stomped through the snow.

“Are you really a beginner? Did you lie?”

“Lie? No, yesterday was my first time skiing.”

Ryūen didn't believe it, spat, and headed for the lift alone.

I guess that's a relief for now. Maybe.

“It's no wonder he's so angry, I mean, you were skiing spectacularly. It was like the hero of a comic book who does everything perfectly with his talent, even if he doesn't work hard. Like Ryūen said, was it really only your second time?”

I hate to say it, but I'm not that kind of comic book hero.

Over the years I had lived, my body and soul accumulated countless experiences.

Even if skiing itself was new to me, sports in general were basically connected by broad and shallow lines.

I just tried to connect them with the verbal and visual information I received.

“You don't believe me?”

“No, I do. But I might not have believed you if I hadn't seen your skills when dealing with Amasawa.”

At that time, I had shown Kushida a fight between White Room students, even if it was only for a moment.

Did that doubt and skepticism from then add credibility to my improvement in skiing?

“That's great.”

I was praised once again, but I couldn't bring myself to accept the praise.

“No, it's not.”

“This again.”

It couldn't be helped that they only saw it as a show of modesty.

But in fact, Ryūen and Kitō's skiing was that of experts, true role models.

They may not have accumulated as much experience as I have.

In that sense, they have much more sense than I do.

“Let's head for a lift, too. Now that the trouble's finished, we can enjoy skiing.”

“Yeah, right. It might be difficult for those who can't ski though.”

That's true for fun in general.

It would be nice if people could enjoy skiing even if they were terrible at it, but that's not the case.

Whether it was video games or sports, those who weren't good at them often didn't enjoy them.

4

At noon, all of us in the sixth group gathered at a restaurant attached to the ski resort. It was set up like a food court, so we each ordered what we wanted and returned to our seats.

I was handed a one-touch call bell labeled “32” and told to get the food I had ordered as soon as it rang.

“How did it go with Watanabe-kun and the others? Were you able to improve your skiing?”

Kushida, being on the advanced course until now, asked about the results of the four who went to the beginner course.

“I’ve learned to ski pretty well. I’m still not as good as Amikura and Nishino, though.”

Watanabe was humble but also revealed a bit of confidence in his growth.

On the other hand, Yamamura, whose name wasn’t mentioned, had a darker expression and wasn’t in high spirits.

“Yamamura is... Well, she’s not ready yet.”

They reported that there was no sign of improvement.

The air of not calling out to the person in question was also very strong, so I decided to keep quiet.

Then the one-touch bell rang and I went to get my meal.

I took the hot soup curry to the table on a tray.

Then, when all eight of us were present, we started our lunch.

Ryūen, who had chosen a hamburger as a light meal, was the first to finish eating and pushed the wrapping paper and tray to Watanabe. Watanabe smiled bitterly and stacked the empty tray on top of his own.

“Give me your time, Ayanokōji.”

“Eh... I’m still in the middle of eating, aren’t I?”

About a third of the soup curry remained. Waiting too long would ruin the hot soup.

“Get on with it.”

Watanabe sent me off silently, feeling sorry for me. Ryūen wasn’t looking at me in the first place.

“I’m going to take a break.”

“Yeah, I’ll wait while everyone else eats.”

I let Kushida take charge of the situation and walked with Ryūen through the food court.

I finally stopped at the end of the food court and took out my cell phone.

I unlocked it with my fingertips and stared at the screen for a while.

“I knew it. Sure enough, that person, Sakayanagi, is using her minions to gather information.”

It seems that she was confirming the report from her classmates.

“I guess it's the same with you too.”

I wasn't asking him directly, but I assumed that Ryūen gave them the same instructions.

“Well. This school trip isn't for cultivating friendship. In order to crush your enemies, it's important to first rip off their limbs. Sakayanagi seems to know that very well.”

Neither Sakayanagi nor Ryūen could fight a class battle as individuals.

It was important to win the class competition as a group.

While it was necessary to improve their fellow students' abilities, it was also important to reduce their opponents' strength.

Sakayanagi had particularly bad legs, and her range of movement was usually very limited.

This was mostly compensated for by Kamuro and Hashimoto.

If a weakness of theirs was discovered that would make them succumb to Ryūen, Sakayanagi would lose a valuable limb. Her ability to gather information would be diminished in a single stroke.

“Let me ask you why you took the trouble to call me here. It's not to report on the reconnaissance battle, is it?”

“I'm going to instruct the rest of my class to start preparing for an all-out war against Sakayanagi. Whether the assignment for the end-of-year exam is a written exam or not, I'll crush her by any means necessary.”

“I heard something similar on the bus. You said the battle has already begun.”

“Yes. But before we make any moves, there's something I need to remind you of.”

As Ryūen said this, my cell phone vibrated once.

I told him to wait a moment and checked the screen to see a short message from Kushida.

[Yamamura-san is on her way to you.]

I was wondering if she was worried about me being summoned by Ryūen and moved to check on me.

In all likelihood, Yamamura was moving under Sakayanagi's instructions.

The possibility that Yamamura was eavesdropping nearby had emerged, but I didn't tell Ryūen.

This was also a scene from the battle between Sakayanagi and Ryūen. My help was to Sakayanagi's detriment.

On the other hand, Ryūen also seemed to have received a message from someone else and was staring at the screen again.

Without changing his expression, Ryūen put his cell phone in his pocket and began to talk.

“I hope you remember what I said a year ago about my 800 million points plan.”

“I still don't think it's feasible.”

“I'm sure you don't. I'm also sure the rest of the class will react the same way when they find out after this.”

“Are you going to tell them?”

The only person in Ryūen's class who knew about the strategy to accumulate 800 million points must be Ibuki. Even Ibuki probably only learned about it by accident and didn't know the specifics.

“It's a fucking expensive plan. It's not an amount of money I could afford if I proceeded in secret. I've got a little over a year left, and it's a little too late to make a move.”

Certainly, the cooperation of his classmates was essential if he was serious about increasing his strategy's chances of success.

Just as Ichinose had gradually pooled everyone's private points in trust, Ryūen also needed to work with his classmates to reach the target amount.

“What you want to confirm is whether I'm willing to cooperate with the 800 million points plan?”

“I've been very cordial with your class up to this point, you know? I also pushed our focus for the end-of-year exams in Sakayanagi's direction. I'm sure you have no complaints.”

I'm sure that since that time last year, when he and I discussed it, Horikita's class had been able to move so freely that they'd partially forgotten about Ryūen's presence. If Ryūen had remained as belligerent as he was in the first year, things wouldn't have gone so smoothly.

“It looks like you're doing pretty well with Kushida, too. I was excited by the idea that you were going to expel her from school.”

“Sorry. Sometimes we have to change our policy.”

Ryūen laughed and clapped his hands several times, as if he took a liking to my words or had a problem with them.

“If I wanted to, it would be no problem to crush Kushida. You know that, don't you?”

Ryūen was one of the few students outside of the class who knew Kushida's true nature.

He could've exposed it at any time, but he didn't, which would be the very result of what he just implied.

“So you want me to fulfill my promise? That's very forceful of you, even including a threat.”

“I don't care if it's forceful or not. Are you going to do it or not?”

At that time, it was a verbal promise, but Ryūen had said that he wouldn't relent if I violated it.

“Before I reply, let me ask you this: even if you were able to defeat Sakayanagi, what would you do after that?”

“After defeating Class A at the end of the school year, it will be a one-on-one battle between my class and your class, that's a given. In my mind, it's all part of the story until we defeat you.”

So that's what he was thinking. I don't doubt it, though, considering what I had seen so far.

“That's a little too convenient. At that time, you got off the stage once. And you were only supposed to be in charge of getting the word out to Kaneda and Hiyori. But now you're back on the stage. If you want to make good on your promise, it makes sense to back out. If we're in Class A and you're in Class B, isn't it inevitable that they will give up the win?”

Only then can we set the scene for the 800 million point cooperation talk.

“You don't like it?”

“Of course not. If Horikita and you, along with both classes really clash, and you win and move up to Class A, our side will be the only one to have made fools of ourselves. Or are you going to promise to promote the students from Horikita's class to Class A if the 800 million plan succeeds?”

The smile faded from Ryūen's face, and he turned his sharp, sideways eyes towards me.

“That's an impossible proposition. The extra private points are ours, of course. It's money that will carry on after we graduate, and we're not going to use it to save students who have nothing to do with it.”

“If they lose, we'll bail you out, and if you win, you'll abandon us? It's a proposal we don't need to think about any longer. We can't cooperate with the plan to accumulate 800 million points. However, you're free to attack any class from now on, and we have no right to stop you.”

“I guess you're not so naive after all, Ayanokōji.”

This wasn't just about me.

I wasn't the only one who had a problem with this. So that's where we left off at that time.

He backed down more easily than I had expected. He seemed to have known that he would be rejected.

“Even if negotiations break down, do you still plan to save up 800 million points?”

“I'm not going to change my strategy now. My main goal is to save the 800 million. After that, I'm going to beat Sakayanagi, and then you. If I don't spend any money and get to Class A, I'll graduate with a lot of money. Right?”

The plan, which had been a dream, was replaced by another ideal.

But from here on, Ryūen boldly claimed that he would save 800 million.

“Up till this point, we've spent money on pulling out Katsuragi and using the first-year brats, but now it's the time to recoup it. I'm going to switch to a thoroughgoing private point system.”

The more eager you were to collect private points, the greater the risk you take.

Ryūen's thoughts and attitude here cast a strange shadow over my thinking.

“You look as if you're wondering why I pressed you to fulfill your promise without making any concessions.”

“That's true. I don't see the purpose of this conversation.”

“It's simple. I can't destroy you if I'm still halfway connected to you. But if you break it like this, it's different. We can go toe-to-toe.”

In other words, he chose his obsession with a renewed vigor over a conflict of interest.

He said something similar on the bus, but he declared war once again.

Still, I wasn't completely convinced. There was an agenda behind this conversation.

I wouldn't find an answer if I pursued it here.

“It's fine to look ahead, but you should think about a rematch only after you beat Sakayanagi.”

“Ha. I know she's smart. But that's all there is to it.”

He showed absolute confidence in the battle during the end-of-year exam.

Ryūen was defeated and then resurrected.

I'll admit that his talent exceeded my expectations.

It's also true that his success story is steadily on track.

However...

At the end of the day, whether or not he'll be able to overcome the obstacles in the path is another matter. I wonder if his inaccuracy in recognizing the obstacles will eventually resonate on the battlefield.

Of course, the signs and indications will change again depending on how Sakayanagi perceives Ryūen as well.

“Go back first, Ayanokōji.”

Saying this, Ryūen walked toward the restroom.

Hiyori, who had been watching us from a somewhat distant seat, noticed us and waved.

Apparently, Hiyori's group had also come to ski.

I slightly raised my hand in reply and returned to the group's table.

Yamamura had already returned and was silently using her cellphone with a nonchalant look on her face.

“Where's Ryūen?”

“He's going to stop by the restroom and then come back.”

“... Are you okay? Did you get hit or anything?”

Watanabe looked worried and checked every part of my body.

“No worries. We were just chatting a little.”

“I hope so...”

Yamamura, who had been eating slowly here, finished her meal and took her tray to the west to match Nishino.

“I... am going to put my tray away.”

Since the two ordered from the same restaurant, they seemed to go back together.

“Ayanokōji, if you have a weakness, feel free to tell me.”

Kitō muttered with a deep gaze, as if he thought Watanabe had been asking too persistently.

I would have liked for him to say those words before I was summoned.

When Ryūen returned shortly after, Kitō shifted his gaze from me.

“You ran away from me and switched to frightening people of other classes?”

“Oh? Kuku, don't worry, Kitō. I'm going to take care of you and the rest of Class A. I'm going to teach you that Sakayanagi is only a steppingstone for me after all.”

“You can't beat Class A.”

“You never know.”

He shrunk the margin, or should I say Ryūen acted to make it look that way.

He may be saying that he can win, but there's no actual proof behind it.

Of course, he may have information that I was unaware of, but in a simple comparison of ability, Sakayanagi was a cut above the rest.

“Don't wait for the end-of-year exam, you can always try to set me up.”

“Hey, hey, you don't have the authority to do that, Kitō. You, whose only merit is your role as a loyal dog, are the one who gets in trouble when you make careless remarks, right?”

Kitō, having been called a dog, placed his large palm on the table and stood up.

“Naturally, I alone am enough to defeat you.”

“Oh? Then is this ‘the third time's the charm?’”

The pillow fight was stopped by a broken pillow. The skiing match wasn't settled due to my intervention.

“Let's be friends, you two. There's already a rumor going around that our group is pretty dangerous.”

Some of the surrounding customers were beginning to look at the standoff between Ryūen and Kitō in wonder.

It was only a matter of time before the teachers would hear about it if they continued to be too flamboyant.

“By the way, aren't Nishino-san and the others late?”

“You could say that.”

It shouldn't have taken more than a minute to take the trays back, but there was no sign of them returning.

Noticing that Nishino and Yamamura hadn't returned, Kushida went looking for them.

“Oh, there they are. But I think they're tangled up with some boys I don't know.”

In the crowded food court, Kushida pointed in the direction of Nishino and Yamamura, who were surrounded by five male students. Both had a grim expression.

“Hey, hey, hey, hey, hey. Let's go help them.”

“It's better not to move in large numbers. If you get caught, you'll be in trouble.”

I had just issued such advice, but there were already people leaving their seats.

The two guys, who wouldn't listen to my advice, went to Nishino and the others without communicating with each other.

“Kushida and the rest, wait here.”

I instructed Kushida, Amikura, and Watanabe not to move.

As I caught up with Ryūen and Kitō, who were heading toward the scene with heavy footsteps, a conversation reached my ears.

“You bumped me on the shoulder and made no apology? My clothes are stained with ramen broth.”

Apparently, it wasn't Nishino who started the trouble, but Yamamura, who seemed to have bumped into the man.

“Isn't it your fault for not noticing Yamamura-san walking by?”

The boys laughed teasingly and touched their own shoulders.

“No, no, I couldn't see you because you looked like a female ghost over here. See?”

“...I'm really... Sorry.”

Yamamura apologized in a small voice. Perhaps she already apologized more than once or twice.

But the boys continued to act as if they hadn't heard her.

“We're here on a school trip from Gifu, let's play. I'll let you off the hook for that.”

The man forcibly grabbed Nishino's arm as he stood there.

“Huh? I'm not interested. Who would play with you guys?”

Nishino's palm lightly brushed against the boy's cheek as she forcibly pulled her arm out of his grasp.

“I know.”

The boys, who had been smiling in a vulgar manner throughout, immediately changed their expressions.

One of the five boys was blown away.

“What the hell are you doing?”

“That's my line. What do you want with my friend?”

It was Ryūen who delivered a powerful kick to the back of the boy's head. He grabbed the other boy by the chest immediately afterwards and raised him up.

“Don't squeal like a peeping bird in front of a woman!”

“I'm going to kill you, you...!”

“Go ahead, try it. I'll let you hit me once if you want. You want a souvenir from the school trip, don't you?”

He held up his index finger as if he was offering his left cheek to him.

“Oh, then thanks for feeling free to let me hit you once!”

He did as he was told and forcefully swung his arm.

“Ah, that's...”

“Don't think I'm really going to let you hit me. You can't even get such advice this time.”

Seeing his opponent's uselessly large movements, Ryūen grabbed both of the boy's shoulders and slammed him with a powerful knee kick to the stomach. The student from the other school rolled around in agony.



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“Even a boring school trip can have a slightly interesting event, can't it?”
Ryūen began to find enjoyment in the situation that was bound to result.
The first event in his high school life that brought him into contact with another school turned out to be a disturbingly violent affair.

One of the boys hit him with his left and right fists, clenched with all his might.

There was no pretense of a one-on-one fight, and the other side seemed intent on winning through numbers.

Then, Kitō appeared, slithering toward them.

The other boys were flustered by his face and intimidating appearance, which was clearly not that of a high school student.

“It looks like he's trying to... Fight on our side.”

Nishino grabbed Yamamura by the shoulders to protect her as she walked over to me and muttered.

“Yamamura is a classmate of Kitō's. It's only natural that he wouldn't back down if he found her in a pinch.”

Fortunately, they seemed to understand that further fighting in the food court wasn't a good idea, and Ryūen and the others walked gingerly toward the exit door.

“Shouldn't someone call an adult?”

“I can't stop them now that they're like that. I'd rather have them avoid the public eye and fight with each other.”

I saw that the opponents outnumbered us, but none of them looked used to cooperating.

If Ryūen and Kitō teamed up to fight, it wouldn't take them long.

About 10 minutes later, Ryūen and the others returned. They came back with the people they beat down.

They made them get down on their knees in front of Yamamura and Nishino and beg for forgiveness.

It looked like they thoroughly beat the defiance out of them and shattered their spirits...

This would be a problem if anyone saw it, but maybe it was necessary for Yamamura and Nishino's sake.

They made them swear never to show themselves in front of the girls again, and then they were released.

“Never a dull moment, huh?”

Kushida whispered and I could only agree.

5

After skiing as much as we could, we returned to the ryokan before 19:00. We hadn't skied enough yet, but it was probably just as well, as we didn't want to leave anything behind.

The end of the second day was approaching, and the night was steadily inching closer. At dinner, Sudō invited me to join him in the large public bath, where I washed my body before relaxing in the hot spring water.

“Ka! It works!”

I'm sure Sudō, who sweats it out during basketball practice on a daily basis, would find it exceptionally effective.

He repeatedly scooped the hot water with both hands and washed his face, seemingly blowing away his exhaustion.

“Yo.”

After soaking in the bathtub for a while in a daze, Hashimoto, a Class A student, came up next to me.

I lightly raised my hand in reply, and Sudo raised his hand in unison.

“Well... I've been really tired today.”

The class was a great way to get to know each other and learn more about each other.

“Did something happen?”

“Nothing happened, I've just been worrying about a problem child in my group.”

Inwardly, Hashimoto's group had been bothering him since the beginning.

“Well, there's Kōenji.”

“Correct. Free activities are supposed to be all hands on deck, right?

Normally, if you have a sane nerve, you should be discussing it, but we're all going along with wherever that guy wants to go.”

It was obvious that Kōenji wasn't the type to maturely obey, and that still doesn't seem to change even in a group environment that included all classes.

“It looks like you were at the ranch that offered horseback riding today. Was that something Kōenji wanted to do?”

“Why would you ask that? Is it any wonder if you saw the commotion he caused?”

Hashimoto, with his head in his hands, immersed the lower half of his face into the bathtub.

“I only saw him ride through, but did Kōenji come back properly after that?”

Hashimoto remained submerged for about ten seconds, but then he shrugged his shoulders and surfaced.

“After about an hour. We didn't have the mental capacity to continue horseback riding, so we just waited it out.”

He then went on to tell us how his free day went.

Sudō murmured his condolences and clasped his hands together.

“We were planning on having lunch at a famous TV restaurant before noon, but that guy Kōenji said he was going skiing. Without even a moment's hesitation, he went straight to the ski resort on his own. I was so exhausted that I didn't have time to have fun. That was the end of our second day.”

If they had ignored him and gone to the famous restaurant, they would've violated the group guidelines.

What a pitiful story.

“I was wondering if you guys, his classmates, had any suggestions on how to deal with him.”

The school trip was just past the halfway point and there were only two days left.

At least for the fourth day, where there was free time again, the group wanted to follow the choice they decided on.

“He's out of control. I guess there's nothing you can do about it.”

Sudō said what he thought.

It sounded cold, but I knew him long enough to know that everyone had already given up on him.

“How about you, Ayanokōji?”

“It's not realistic to try to convince Kōenji. I honestly don't think there's anything you can do about it.”

“...It's a ruthless reality.”

“But there's one way to do it if it comes down to it.”

“What is it? Let me hear it.”

Hashimoto, who wanted to know how to de-escalate the situation no matter how small the possibility, bit the bullet.

There was only one move that would guarantee free movement as long as the disadvantages were acceptable.

When I finished telling him the method, Hashimoto nodded his head in agreement.

“Well, that's about all that's left, isn't it?”

“I think you should discuss what to do as a group.”

“I'll do that, and we'll consider it seriously.”

Hashimoto disappeared back into the bathtub as he thought about it.

6

After spending an hour in the large bath and putting on our yukatas, both Sudō and I took a bottle of free mineral water from the refrigerated case in the changing room and poured it down our throats with our hands on our hips. The cool water soaked into our burning bodies.

“I’m... Ready for this, Ayanokōji.”

“I guess this means it’s time to go.”

His face was slightly red, perhaps because he was still a little flushed from the long bath. Or perhaps it was because he was nervous about what was to come. It was time to tell Horikita how he felt. Sudō gulped down the half-full water in one go.

“Phew! Let’s go!”

He slapped both cheeks simultaneously to fire himself up, as if he were about to enter a basketball game.

“So? What exactly are you going to do?”

It was just past 9:30 p.m. Most of the students were probably in their rooms, relaxing with their friends. I doubt anyone was already sleeping. I can’t imagine them having fun or making noise together, but I wouldn’t be surprised if Horikita was watching them with a warm gaze.

“Anyway, yes... I’ll try calling her on her cell phone.”

Clutching his phone, he walked through the warm room and exited the men’s bath... and immediately started calling.

“...Oh, hey, it’s me. Where are you?”

He asked in a hurry, as she answered the phone without wasting time.

“In the lobby? Okay, just wait there for a minute. I’ll be right there.”

Sudō hung up and looked at me as he walked away, breathing heavily.

“There’s a small corner in the lobby of the ryokan that sells souvenirs, right? I heard she’s there.”

“Don’t confess right away, okay? It’s easy to be seen in the lobby. Horikita will be in trouble too.”

“I know, I know.”

A confession is a big event that requires consideration of not only the one confessing, but also the recipient.

“But where should I confess...?”

“If it’s in the hallway leading to the backyard, no one will be coming at this time, right?”

There was a little wooden deck with a nice view if you headed up the stairs leading from the backyard to the higher ground.

However, after 9 p.m., you couldn't go out to that backyard, so there should be no one there.

“As one would expect from you, Ayanokōji, you're a good friend to have.”

He said with a thumbs up and a smile. It was a stiff, nervous smile though.

When a restless Sudō arrived at the lobby at a brisk pace, Horikita stopped browsing souvenirs, waiting nearby. I, on the other hand, kept my distance and stood in a blind spot.

In the lobby, there was one employee and several students looking at souvenirs or sitting on chairs chatting, allowing me to realize once again that this wasn't the right place for a confession.

Somehow, while gesturing with his hands, Sudō seemed to have succeeded in calling Horikita to the hallway leading to the backyard, and the two of them started walking in that direction side by side.

If that was the case, I should probably stop chasing them at this point, but it would also be troublesome to have Sudō chastise me. I followed them to watch his heroic figure while trying to minimize the sound of my footsteps.

Soon after, as I had expected, signs of people disappeared, and I stopped in the middle of an empty corridor.

“What's wrong?”

Horikita turned around and wondered. Her hair was glossy, so much so that even in the dim light I could tell she had also been bathing not long beforehand.

“I'm fine.”

Sudō, whose imposing demeanor was his main selling point, was perhaps too nervous in front of the member of the opposite sex he liked—something that was made clear by his low voice.

At night, the ryokan was a quiet place with subdued background music and quiet chatter, so unexpected loud noises were to be avoided, even in an unpopular area. That being the case, his voice was suitable.

“I'm... That...”

Horikita tilted her head curiously at Sudō's stuttering.

The two weren't particularly irritated or rushed at this point.

This may have been another indication of the trust Horikita and Sudō had built between them.

When they first met, Horikita would've rushed him to state his business, no questions asked.

At this point, my cell phone started vibrating.

Even though I had it on silent mode, there was a possibility that they could hear me in the quiet environment.

Therefore, I immediately powered my cell phone off without checking the screen.

It seemed that she didn't notice me. That's a relief for now.

“Hey, Suzune. Am I... Changing?”

I thought he was going to make his confession, but Sudō asked something else, as if he was squeezing the question out of himself.

“I was wondering... How much difference there is between me now and when I met you.”

“Are you still worried about what people think of you?”

“Yes, that too.”

It was a topic that would keep the two occupied while Sudō's courage to confess built up.

At the same time, it seemed that Sudō himself continued to be conscious of this.

“That's right. Objectively speaking, you've changed more than anyone else. Not for the worse, but for the better. I've been standing by your side for a long time, and I can assure you of that.”

Those were Horikita's true feelings.

No, it would be an opinion that many other students would agree with as well, not just Horikita.

“Oh, I see.”

“But don't become prideful. You originally started out, if I may say so without reservation, in a more negative state than those around you. Don't think that just because you have accumulated positives since then, that easily makes you a more accomplished person than others.”

The great rebound from the misleading initial negative impression was highly valued by others.

However, as Horikita said, the accumulated negatives hadn't gone away.

“Yes, that's right. No, I seriously think that's true.”

Sudō nodded his head in acceptance, depressed due to the harsh words, but resolutely accepting them.

“That's not good. I've been a fool myself.”

The tardiness and absences, the lowest ranking on the written exam, the abusive language, and the immediate violence.

No matter how many times he looked back, the past never changed, and he was ashamed of the path he had taken.

“You seem to have a firm and humble heart.”

He nodded, and then Horikita gently squinted her eyes at him and smiled.

He probably didn't realize it, but Horikita changed a lot.

The magnitude of that change was probably not much different from Sudō's.

“You don't needlessly hurt or annoy others anymore. It's okay.”

Apparently, Horikita interpreted this as Sudō asking her for advice due to being unsure about his own growth and past. This must have been conveyed to Sudō, who shook his head hurriedly.

“No, no, no, Suzune.”

“No?”

“I... I'm...”

Perhaps remembering what he had declared to me, Sudō quickly held out his right hand.

But the words didn't follow the actions, only the outstretched and spread hand remained in front of her.

“What? What is this?”

Horikita was about to inquire about the meaning of his right hand since she didn't understand.

“I love you! Please go out with me!”

He was able to free himself from the shame of trying to hold back and said the words clearly.

His voice was loud, but... I'll ignore that for now.

If someone was in range to hear it, I could detect it and prevent it.

“E-eh...?”

Horikita, who had never expected a confession, froze as if she was shocked.

“If you'll go out with me, I want you to hold my right hand in return!”

“Hey... Is that seriously...?”

Horikita was about to ask back, but quickly retracted her words.

It must be some kind of joke, right? Since she could tell that Sudō's passion, enthusiasm, and thoughts were so genuine, she understood that it would be impolite to say such a thing.

Horikita stared at his right hand and closed her lips.

I thought she would respond immediately, but Horikita remained silent, staring at his right hand.

The longer the silence continued, the higher Sudō's heart rate must have soared.

It was likely a painful wait, not at all comfortable.

However, Horikita should've been given time to consider it.

A confession cannot be made while only considering one party's feelings.

Horikita's mind must have eventually come to a decision, as she began to speak slowly, as if choosing her words.

“I have never once thought that I would be the one to receive a confession from someone.”

How will Horikita answer Sudō's passionate feelings?

Will she accept or decline?

Or will she put the matter on hold?

As the silence dragged on, Sudō's right arm seemed to gradually begin to tremble.

It wasn't due to numbness in his arm, but nervousness and fear.

It was a feeling of frustration at not receiving a response, wondering if he would be accepted or not.

Still believing that the hand he held out would be grasped, Sudō continued to bow his head.

“Sudō-kun. Thank you for liking someone like me.”

She expressed her gratitude.

However, Horikita didn't make a move to take his right hand.

“But I'm sorry. I am... Unable to answer your feelings.”

That was the conclusion Horikita drew after considering it.

“Yes, well, if you... Like, can you at least tell me... Why?”

Unable to lift his gaze, Sudō said that with his right hand going rigid.

“Reason... I guess. It's not that I'm dissatisfied with you...”

She started to speak, but then stopped.

“I'll be honest, I've never been in love with another person before. I don't have those feelings right now, and I have no idea what it's like. I thought that if I went out with Sudo-kun, who told me he liked me, there might be a chance that I could fall in love with you over time. But... I decided I don't want that kind of inducement. Maybe I'm waiting for the moment when I naturally fall in love with someone.”

As if to confirm her feelings, Horikita told Sudō so.

That was why she refused.

A desire to keep waiting for her first love.

It was surely a hidden feeling that she would never let an unrelated stranger hear.

“Well, thanks for...For telling me.”

Perhaps because he had been told so resolutely, Sudō didn't try to bite back.

“Your courage and your feelings—I got the message very clearly.”

Horikita said this, and as he was about to lower his now lifeless right hand, she hurriedly grabbed it.

“I certainly received your feelings. Thank you for liking me.”

Sudō's trembling right hand said it all.



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I decided it was time to turn around and go back to the souvenir shop to wait for their return.

7

In the souvenir section, which had yet to close, various Hokkaido souvenirs were on display.

“On that note, Nanase said something about chocolate-coated fries.”

I tried to find out what exactly they were, but I couldn't find any, as the ryokan didn't carry them.

It seems I'll have to look for them while visiting tomorrow's designated locations or during my free time on the last day of the trip.

I'll check my cell phone to see if there are any stores that carry them.

“Oops....”

I powered my cell phone on and checked it, and immediately saw a large number of messages and incoming call logs.

Of course, they were from Kei.

[Where are you?]

[I haven't seen you at all yesterday or today.]

[Are you in the middle of something?]

[I miss you.]

[I miss you so much!]

I opened the app and read all the messages sent to me every few seconds.

Immediately after, the phone rang.

[Touwa!]

It sounded like a cat's growl, which was an apt description.

[Are you mad at me?]

“No, I'm not mad.”

I see, it seemed that she was very, very angry with me.

[Why don't you at least give me a little attention?]

“Sorry. We're on a school trip, but I have a lot of things to do.”

[I don't know if that's a good thing!]

“I've already confirmed that you're doing a good job of getting information about the eleventh group from Kushida, so I was relieved on my own.”

[Hmmm? You seem to be having a lot of fun with her?! You're so rude! Cheater!]

“We're in the same group. Besides, you know what kind of person she is.”

[It doesn't matter. And she's got big boobs! I'm not a... Ah mou!]

“Okay, okay. I'll make some time now, so let's meet up somewhere.”

[Really? Then let's go have fun!]

Being very attention-hungry, she soon came back to sounding cheerful.

“I don't think we should do that. I have Ryūen in my room.”

[Oh... I see.]

“Where are you now?”

[I'm in my room, but I think the three girls are still in the bathtub. I was with them a while ago, but I came back first to call you.]

Kei was extremely self-conscious about the scars on her body, but it seemed like she had completely gotten over it.

“I'm going to get the key to my room, so I'm going back to my room immediately. I'll call you after that, so wait for me.”

[Yes!]

I waited for less than five minutes for Sudō in the souvenir corner. When there was no sign of his return, I became curious and decided to check the corridor leading to the backyard.

I found Sudō standing alone in the same position as when he confessed his feelings.

Since I couldn't see Horikita, she must've already left.

“Sudō?”

Since Kei was also waiting for me, I felt bad but approached him from here and called out to him.

“Oh, shit!”

It was possible that he had an irritated look on his face judging from his voice, but...

“I knew I couldn't do it...!”

Sudō's face, when he turned around, had a look of frustration on it, but he also looked radiant.

“No, my bad. I was in a daze because I couldn't forget the feeling of Suzune's hand.”

“So that's what you meant.”

“Did you see that? It was a stunningly disastrous defeat.”

“Well, if so, you should be proud of yourself.”

I was shown an amazing confession, done in a very masculine, full-throated way.

“Even if she rejected my confession, I wasn't going to give up. I even thought about showing a better version of myself next year and confessing again. But that's no good. I realized that at the very least, I can't reach her.”

Sudō seemed to sense something that I, who was watching from a distance, couldn't.

“It's not a matter of giving up or not giving up. I still like her, but I feel like she's like a flower that I long for, one I can't reach.”

He couldn't seem to put it all together, but he laughed a little when he said that.

“What are you going to do about Onodera?”

“How should I know? You didn't ask her what she really thinks, did you?”

“Yes, I have.”

“Well, whatever will be, will be. Onodera is a nice girl, and we share the same interests. I'm not full of bitterness regarding Suzune, and I feel like I can hang out with her in a fair way.”

Whether it developed into love or not was secondary, I guess.

“I'm telling you; I'm going to study hard in the future. Up until now, it's been for someone else, but from today on, I'm going to give it my all for myself. My immediate goal is to get to Hirata's level.”

“That's a pretty big goal again.”

If he could get over that wall, he would finally be facing the upper echelon of the school year, Horikita and Keisei.

It seems that he was able to focus on greater goals instead of continuing to be discouraged by the rejection.

8

I walked back to the guest room at a brisk pace and found Horikita standing outside.

“What are you doing?”

“I was waiting for you.”

“Me?”

I had a bad feeling about this, so I tried to feign confusion, but Horikita's expression was hard.

“You're mean as well, Ayanokōji-kun. You saw it, didn't you?”

“What are you talking about?”

“You were in the souvenir section earlier, weren't you? Normally, I would think it was just a coincidence that someone was nearby, but in your case, I tried not to think of it as such.”

What an unnatural way of thinking. However, it was correct. If I ever took similar steps against Horikita in the future, I'll have to make sure she can't find me.

“You're thinking of trying to avoid being seen next time, aren't you?”

“...Well done.”

I applauded her honestly and praised her for her astute reading.

“That's what Sudō asked me to do. He asked me to watch over him as he confessed.”

“Even if that's the case, don't you think that's a lack of consideration for the woman's side - for me?”

“I don't think so.”

“You're not being fair, Sudō-kun. I have to deduct points for you asking him to observe.”

I was stunned, but she didn't seem that angry.

“So? Did you come all the way here to complain to me, a mere spectator?”

“Yes.”

Again, she said it clearly and without reservation.

“I'm only half joking. The truth is, I really need to talk to you. But you seem to need to get into the room.”

“It's not like that, but... If you don't mind, can we do it tomorrow?”

“Why?”

“I'm getting a lot of pressure from a different person. They're upset because I haven't dealt with them at all for the past two days.”

“I see, so it's Karuizawa-san, is it?”

She was probably going to figure it out anyways.

“Tomorrow night then. I'll forgive you if you can promise to lend me your ear at that time.”

“Okay, I promise.”

I replied, as there was no other option at this point.

I left the key with Kitō, who was in the room, and headed to meet Kei.

Although we were already recognized by many as an official couple, we couldn't go everywhere like Ike and Shinohara.

We decided to meet up in an area housing several private baths.

I was scolded severely as soon as we met up, but I hugged her soon after and got her back in a good mood. We then spent some relaxing time together for a while.

Chapter 4: School Trip: Third Day

THE BUS DEPARTED from the ryokan at 9:00 a.m., arriving at our destination less than 50 minutes later.

The bus stopped near the Sapporo Station, the place where we would start our day. The Sapporo Clock Tower was located here, and there were many points of interest for tourists. As usual, we were divided into groups, but there was one difference from the previous days.

The school gave us a little test. Within a time limit (until 5:00 p.m.), the group must visit a total of six spots from a predetermined list of 15 destinations, in any combination. The group must take a commemorative photo when they arrive at the designated photo location. This process was to be repeated. Groups that intentionally split up their members to collect points or groups with students who act selfishly and fail to act in solidarity wouldn't be able to complete the tour.

The only condition for disqualification was if a group visited fewer than six spots within the time limit. In that case, the students would be deprived of free activities on the fourth day of the excursion, and a study session would be held in the ryokan until 4:00 p.m.

Each spot was assigned a score, and the group that accumulated a total of 20 points or more in the six spots will be rewarded with 30,000 private points. However, the group was allowed to decide whether or not to pursue the reward, as the score will not affect the disqualification.

Also, if the photo wasn't clear enough to identify the person, it wouldn't be valid. Whether or not the students were aiming for a reward was another matter, but if they wanted to enjoy tomorrow's free time to the fullest, they needed to work hard and cooperate with each other to visit the designations.

There were no restrictions on the number of times students could use public transportation, but cab rides were prohibited. Students were also required to keep a record of how they visited the sites. I'm sure many of them would be happier if they had free time to do whatever they wanted on this third day, but I don't think it's a bad idea to walk along Hokkaido under the conditions given to us by the school.

If the students were only given free time to do whatever they wanted, the school trip would end with a limited number of sightseeing spots and skiing. I'm genuinely looking forward to touring Hokkaido.

When we got off the bus, we were handed a pamphlet. It was the school's own pamphlet, and it seemed to contain some of the places we should visit.

Locations worth 1 point consisted of the Sapporo Clock Tower, the Sapporo

TV Tower, and the Hokkaido Museum of Modern Art. Nakanaka Island Park and the Hokkaido Shrine were worth 2. Sapporo Enmaruyama Zoo, Hokkaido Museum, and the Sapporo Central Wholesale Market were 3 points. Moerenuma Park and Shiroyo Koibito Park received 4 points. Moerenuma Iwaizan Mountain was 5 points. Sunpiaza Aquarium scored 6 points. Sadajiyozanzankei Onsen (hot spring) was 7 points. And Lake Utonai, also known as Shikotsukotsu-ko, was 8 points.

Note that it didn't end when you arrived at the spot.

For the Sapporo Maruyama Zoo, you must enter the zoo and take a photo with a polar bear or the polar bear pavilion in the background to complete the spot tour.

"I'm not surprised. It's very typical of this school to do this..." Kushida got off the bus and said this to no one in particular.

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, hey, I'm sorry, I didn't notice you at all."

I don't see how that's possible seeing as I was right here, but she wasn't looking at me while speaking. She turned his head around and smiled.

"It hurts to know that if I don't do it right, I'll lose a whole day to study sessions. I wonder if the reason they let us have a whole day of free time yesterday without any restrictions had something to do with this tour."

"That may be so."

Now the question was what choice we, the sixth group, would make. The tour had been explained to us before the trip, but we had just been told on the bus that it would be like a test with free time at stake, and that we would be rewarded with private points. In other words, the group's policy was not set at this time. It was inevitable that there would be cases where groups moving for the private point reward wouldn't be able to meet the time limit, and this was a risk that must be taken.

Some groups seemed to stay where they were and discuss the matter, but most of them started walking in the same direction.

"After all, it looks like many of the groups are heading for the Sapporo Clock Tower, which was just a stone's throw away."

One strategy was to go for the high-scoring Utonai Lake, but it was risky.

"It would be more efficient to discuss it while walking."

As for the high road, as Kushida said, the first safe route would be to go from Sapporo Station to the clock tower, take photos at the designated spot, and then head down Oodori Street Park to the TV tower. It was time-efficient, cost-effective, and allowed you to visit two spots. However, at this point, I wasn't sure if it was ideal for the process of aiming for more than 20 points.

Later, all eight members of our sixth group also finished disembarking.

“I just did a quick search on the map app, and it looks like even if we could use a cab, it would take us several hours to visit the six high-scoring spots.”

Even with full use of public transportation, it would be impossible to visit all the high-value spots in the time available.

“Does anyone here know anything about Hokkaido?”

Watanabe asked the members of the sixth group, but there was no good answer.

I, like the other students, had no knowledge of how to travel in Hokkaido or the most efficient means of getting around, so I couldn't derive where it was efficient to go without doing some research.

“Hmm. Even if I tried to give a route on a map app, I wouldn't even know where things are, so the order would be messed up.” Amikura seemed to be typing in destinations at random as she struggled with the map app.

Since the spots were scattered to the east, west, north, and south of the station, she would have to start by figuring out their location. There was no guarantee that the spots would be accessible by public transportation, and there was no guarantee that the school hadn't listed a nasty, difficult spot on the brochure.

“Even if we get private points, it's still only 30,000. Since we're going to tour the area, why not forget about the reward and just have fun?” Watanabe's suggestion was one of the better options.

If we only went to visit places to earn 20 points in time, our enjoyment would be reduced by half. There would be no time to relax and enjoy the local scenery.

“So I'm thinking that we don't have to go overboard.”

“I think I'd rather not go where we have to, either, personally. I'd rather go to the zoo or something.”

Students who normally stayed inside the school didn't have the opportunity to go to the zoo or aquarium. It was natural for them to think that they shouldn't waste the opportunity.

“Let's ask everyone where they want to go and gather ideas first.”

Amikura proposed that we start by asking for places to go, ignoring the scores. Six of us, including me, easily agreed to abandon the scoring and leisurely tour a minimum number of spots. However, this was something that needed to be discussed and decided by the entire group.

The opinion of Kitō and Ryūen, both of whom had neither agreed nor disagreed so far, remained.

“What do you think, Kitō?”

Watanabe asked Kitō, who remained silent up to this point.

“I have no objection.”

Watanabe and the others were relieved when they received a favorable response to their question.

Now there were seven in agreement. The last one, Ryūen, didn't reply.

“Uh, well...”

Watanabe hesitated to ask, so I decided to ask and confirm the answer.

“We all agreed. Can we take your silence as agreement?”

But Ryūen had declared that he would accumulate 800 million points. The answer was obvious.

“I'm going to score.”

A simple reply, in other words, a direction at odds with the seven of us. Of course, it was up to each individual to decide what he or she thought of this spot tour.

I'm sure some groups would prioritize the tour for the sake of private points. However, when opinions diverged like this, additional discussions were inevitable. Watanabe became further frightened, so I decided to continue listening to him.

“Let's just ask him why, shall we?”

“Of course, it's a matter of private points. I don't think it's just 30,000.”

The points each class gets would be 60,000 for the two of them combined. It's only a speck in the 800 million ratio, but it's also a steady step forward.

“There's no reason not to pick up the money that's falling in front of you. You guys need to just shut up and follow.”

While there was a risk of running out of time or not scoring enough points due to mismanagement, there were basically no disadvantages to this tour. If you followed the guidelines and completed the objectives, the school would give you private points. In other words, there were only benefits. It's certainly true that not taking what you can get is a loss. Of course, there was no way that Kitō would remain silent about his aggressive attitude that ignored the will of the other seven students.

“You want all of us to obey you for your satisfaction?”

“For sure. Is there something wrong with that?”

“That's a blatant disregard of democracy. In this case, I think the issue should be decided by majority vote.”

“Don't make me laugh. Since when did this group become a democracy?”

“I don't understand your obsession with pennies in the first place. You seem stupid to me.”

“Then what would that make you?”

I no longer counted how many times they've bickered. No one was able to interrupt the clash between Ryūen and Kitō.

“I think you rejected the group's agreement and spoke up just to stir things up.”

“Actually, you might be right. It's funny to see you get pissed off.”

If I let the two of them continue talking, we would soon be heading in a dangerous direction.

“You also need some private points to use public facilities. If we deduct that, we won't end up with 30,000 private points per person, so even then?”

I didn't know the exact amount at this point, but some expense would be necessary.

“Even so. Even if the reward drops to nearly 20,000, I'm not going to give up on it.”

I noticed that we were the only group left around the bus.

“We're wasting valuable time while we do this. You know that, don't you, Kitō?”

He was trying to make him concede. Such was the strong pressure from Ryūen. Of course, there was no way that Kitō would remain silent with this comment, which only seemed to add fuel to the fire.

“I refuse. If you insist on getting private points and ignoring the opinions of everybody else, I won't cooperate with your tour of this spot. In other words, not only will you not get your private points, but you'll be deprived of your free time tomorrow.”

Apparently, Kitō was determined to resist completely and declared that he wouldn't accept Ryūen's wishes. So he strongly protested once again.

“Kukuku, you're the one who will be in the minority, Kitō. They'll have no choice but to follow me after a while anyway.”

Are we going to start a contest of patience from now that would do us no good? The best way to move Ryūen, who wasn't going to budge, was to steer Kitō in the direction of collecting private points. 30,000 wasn't a bad deal for the six of them, and it wasn't completely disadvantageous.

Besides, if they were guaranteed free time tomorrow, they could make up for the sightseeing they couldn't do today.

If the six people, excluding Kitō, leaned toward Ryūen, that would be the majority opinion.

“Even if all of us are forced to follow you, I will not follow you.”

If that happens, it would make Kitō the villain by 7 to 1.

“If you're going to destroy the group by yourself, maybe it's worth giving up on the money?”

“I hope so.”

Kitō showed no sign of flinching, as if he was used to being the villain.

“Oh, calm down, Kitō!”

Watanabe, who had been timid up to this point, had no choice but to interject.

“Then you're going to have to talk Ryūen out of it, aren't you?”

“Uh...” Watanabe wondered what to do.

“Yes, that's right. Hey, Nishino, as a classmate, knock some sense into Ryūen, will you?”

“It's easy to give him a hard time, but there's no way he'll change his mind. I won't do anything unnecessary.”

I guess Nishino, who had known him for a long time, could already predict the outcome.

She was in a mood to concede early on, saying there was nothing she could do now that it had come to this.

“Hey, can I have a word? What do you think we should do about this situation?” Kushida tugged on my arm, and after pulling some distance, she asked me a question.

“I thought it would be safer to follow Ryūen-kun, but Kitō-kun has ended up like that as well. That said, Ryūen-kun won't budge if I go along with Kitō-kun. They're really selfish people.”

They were both called out, as if their negative aspects were on display.

“It's not like there isn't a solution.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“It's just that I'd rather not recommend it if I could.”

“Can you tell me in a nutshell?”

“What Ryūen wants are private points, no sightseeing required. What the seven of us want, on the other hand, is to go where we want to go and enjoy the sights. Kitō's opinion is also on this side.”

“Yes. They're at odds with each other, aren't they?”

“Then the seven of us should just cut our losses. If we, excluding Kito, raise 5,000 private points per person and donate them to Ryūen, there will be no complaints, right?”

“Oh, I see, that's one way to solve this problem...”

But Ryūen might not be satisfied with only him receiving 30,000 private points. I continued to talk to Kushida about the risks. When this group receives their reward, each class would receive 60,000 private points. That means that, at the very least, he would collect 30,000 from Nishino, who was also in the same class. Even if Nishino declined, Ryūen would demand the money in order to line his own pockets after all.

In that case, the five of us would have to pay 60,000 private points, or 12,000 private points per person. There would be some resistance to paying that much for the sake of sightseeing.

“It's not cheap... Right?”

What was supposed to be a tour that could only result in a gain in the first

place would turn out to be a loss. It was doubtful whether we'd be able to honestly enjoy the sightseeing afterwards.

It would also set a bad precedent for the majority of the group to give in to the aggressive stance of the minority.

“And worst of all, we have to consider the risk of them asking us to give them more.”

“Huh? That kind of bullshit... This is so bothersome.”

“That's what I'm talking about.”

“I understand what you mean, Ayanokōji-kun. That's why I don't recommend it.”

“I think it's best to come to a decision without anything of the sort.”

“It's not easy to have a peaceful discussion, or rather, it's impossible.”

Certainly, it was unlikely that Ryūen or Kitō would easily give in, and it was inevitable that they would be stymied.

“That's right. It's basically a contest of endurance already? We'd have to push ourselves pretty hard to collect more than 20 points, right? It's going to be tough if we waste 30 minutes or an hour here.”

So the strategy was to let them use up this time arguing. But that choice also encompassed a number of problems.

“If Ryūen decides that we don't have enough time, there's no guarantee that he'll maturely enjoy visiting the locations and sightseeing after that. It'll be a failure in the end. I'm pretty sure that tomorrow's free time will be gone.”

“Oh, I see.”

There weren't many steps we could take here. We had no choice but to take some risks and try to put it all together.

“I don't want to waste this precious day either. We're going to have to endure the pain to get things going.”

“What are you going to do about it?”

I came to one conclusion, but before I did, I realized something important. The proximity between Kushida and I was maintained for too long, even if it was to avoid being overheard by those around us.

The fact that only Kushida and I were having a private conversation was clearly highlighted.

“You're dating Karuizawa, aren't you?”

Watanabe said with a bit of a glare. Amikura also gave me a funny look as we walked back.

“It was a strategy meeting. Right, Kushida?”

“Of course. I just talked with Ayanokōji-kun.”

Saying that, Kushida quickly moved away from me. It was an over-acting gesture, as if she was blatantly walking away from someone she didn't like, and it

wasn't very pleasant.

But it seemed to satisfy Watanabe and the others, so I guess it was the right move. I regained my composure and approached Kitō, who was still glaring at Ryuen, and Ryūen, who was looking at his cell phone without a care. I then turned my back to them and faced the other five.

“I have something I want to confirm with you all again, except for Ryūen and Kitō. I want to recount the opinions at this point. Do we prioritize sightseeing or private points? If anyone has changed their mind on the latter, please raise your hand. You don't have to worry about the mood at the moment, just indicate your intentions.”

Watanabe and the others all looked around to see what the others were doing, but none of them wanted to raise their hands. I could tell by their demeanor that none of them seemed to be lying.

In other words, no one agreed with the policy of prioritizing tourism aimed at obtaining the required score.

“So what? I ain't gonna change my opinion no matter what you say, Ayanokōji.”

I knew he didn't care whether he had any allies to support him.

“Sorry, but I need to talk to the five of you right now.”

I quickly shifted my gaze from Ryūen and turned around to continue talking to the other five.

“Since we're in this situation, I've concluded that all eight of us will never be able to come together, and that it's a waste of time to talk about it.”

“Then what are you going to do?”

Nishino, as someone who wanted to do some sightseeing, made no attempt to hide her dissatisfaction.

“It doesn't have to be like this. Individual opinions should be respected as much as possible, but as a group, only one-eighth of the right to decide is in effect. Kitō's opposition to Ryūen is only one-eighth of the total. Even without my opinion, the five of us here have five-eighths of the right to decide, which is more than half.”

“I know that, but that's why we're in trouble, isn't it? Whether it's one-eighth or five-eighths, we can't move forward unless we all make the same choice.”

“Yes, that's right. However, it's undeniably the five of us who have the right to decide what to do about this situation. If you don't agree with Ryūen's methods and ideas, you don't have to follow them. In other words, we can make him give up the choice to get private points. We can drop the idea of visiting the spots now, and each of us can do our own free sightseeing.”

“You mean we're going to abandon the free time tomorrow?”

“Correct. Even if we follow Ryūen's plan here, there's no guarantee that

we'll be able to go to the places the group wants to go during tomorrow's free time after all. If we insist on not leaving the inn, at that point, this group won't even be allowed to go out. On the other hand, we're promised freedom today."

"But only until 5:00 p.m., right?"

"That's not true. 5 p.m. is for the group that's going to be touring the spots and planning their free time for tomorrow. We have the right to do as we please until curfew, when we have to return to the inn. And we can do whatever we want as individuals. We can even join a group that has our good friends. The school can't fault us for that."

To abandon the fourth day and turn the third day into a day of completely free activity that no one could restrict.

"This is the absolute authority that only the five of us have. It isn't up to Ryūen or Kitō to decide what to do, so I want you all to consider this proposal."

"I agree." Kushida looked into the others' eyes without unnecessary conversation and was convinced that their opinions were united as one.

"Ryūen-kun, we're still not going to try to win private points. We all want to discuss where we want to go together today and have a fun day. If you don't want to go with us, we'll probably have to go our separate ways from here on out. What happens after that is just as Ayanokōji-kun said. Maybe tomorrow we'll all get along and have a one-day study session."

Nishino laughed at these words, and Amikura, Watanabe, and Yamamura nodded their heads, as if they were ready for the day ahead.

In response, Kitō's lips turned up at the corners, but only slightly.

"That's a good proposal. I'll take you up on it."

Kitō, who had been opposed to Ryūen up to this point only out of rebellious spirit, now sided with the five of us. With everyone having come to a conclusion, the ball would effectively be passed to Ryūen for the first time.

He could either follow Kushida's opinion and give up the private points, or rebel and ignore the plan. Either way, he wouldn't get the private points he wanted. On the contrary, he'll even get a study session tomorrow as an added bonus.

"You've gone the extra mile, Ayanokōji." He expressed his dissatisfaction in words, but he didn't seem to be truly dissatisfied.

To those around him, though, it must've seemed like he was putting up a front.

"I'm not going to come all the way to a tourist destination to study. I'll listen to you."

I wondered how far the line would be pushed, but Ryūen backed down. If he could've gained private points by breaking up the group, he would've done so without hesitation. As it turned out though, there was no gain, so he avoided trouble.

After that, we, the sixth group, followed the school's instructions and went on a tour, visiting spots around the city center and the zoo that we wanted to visit.

As a result, we got less than 20 points, but it was a meaningful and satisfying experience.

1

It was dinner time on the third day. The previous two days had been Japanese-style set meals and kaiseki cuisine. However, from this evening until breakfast the day after tomorrow, when we would return to the school, the ryokan would set up an all-you-can-eat buffet. This was the first all-you-can-eat experience of my life.

As with yesterday, there was no group activity involved in the meal, and students were free to eat at any available table. Many students were already walking around with their trays. Kei was also with many girls today, and I could hear them laughing from time to time even from afar.

Finally having time to myself to eat alone without interruptions, I watched the students around me and learned the procedure.

The process seemed to include picking up a tray from a stack, freely combining the dishes in the tray according to their purpose, and taking the dishes one by one along a predetermined route. A salad bowl was placed first, with lettuce, tomatoes, onions, pickles, and other such things were served.

There seemed to be a choice of five different dressings, so I chose the onion dressing.

“Interesting.”

Unlike a meal where you were served something predetermined, you had a strong sense of individuality when you made your own detailed choices.

I found myself gravitating toward dishes that emphasized nutritional balance. On the other hand, the students around the restaurant were very varied, with some taking dishes that matched the students they were eating with, and others preparing small quantities of different types of food at once.

After that, for the delicate dishes, students began to gather in a line behind me, one after another. I thought there would've only been a few students since it was a little early for dinner, but it was quite the opposite.

It seemed that more students were waiting for the restaurant to open. Although the food was mainly Japanese, there were also steaks, shumai, corn soup, and other dishes.

“Yo, Ayanokōji. Are you planning to eat alone?”

As I was trying to find a seat after filling my tray, I was approached by an empty-handed Ishizaki.

“That's the plan.”

“Well, come eat with me. I asked Nishino earlier too, because she was alone. And you must be lonely eating by yourself, right?”

“Well... I guess.”

Since there was no particular reason to refuse, it was better to accept Ishizaki's goodwill here.

I followed Ishizaki as he led me to my seat, Nishino slightly raised her hand in greeting. Albert also seemed to be there, and I assumed our eyes met through his sunglasses. I placed my tray down next to one tray with a large quantity of food on it, which I assumed belonged to Ishizaki.

“Well, I still have some more food to get. Go ahead and eat first.”

He was empty-handed when he called out to me, likely because there was more food he wanted.

Ishizaki hummed as he walked back to the buffet.

“I heard you were also invited by Ishizaki's meddling.”

“I wanted to turn him down, but he was insistent.”

“He's the type of guy who can't leave his friends alone, right?”

“I don't know. He's changed a lot since the start of school.”

It was true that he emitted a much brighter aura these days, a definite change from when I first entered the school. To be honest, though, since we had very little contact with each other, I didn't have a lasting impression of him.

“In the beginning, he seemed to dislike Ryūen, and he was a bit rebellious.”

He didn't seem to understand it then because he was repressed, but perhaps this was the original Ishizaki. The one whose impression remained somewhat the same might be Albert, who ate silently. He dexterously used chopsticks with his large hands.

“Hey! I brought a ton of crab! I'm on a crab binge!”

Ishizaki came back and put a platter holding a large pile of crabs on the tray. The crab legs fell off the tray as he placed it on the table.

“That's a hell of a lot of food.”

“If there's one thing I know about Hokkaido, it's crabs. I was after all of them, so I hurriedly gathered them up.”

“You're so vulgar.”

Indeed, among the colorful menu, many students gathered around the crabs. I didn't want to be part of the crowd, so I gave up on the first round.

“What's vulgar? This is a Viking! You can take all you want!” Ishizaki said, arguing that we'd miss out if we didn't take any.

“First of all, that 'Viking' is as lame as it gets, so why don't you stop saying it?”

“What? What else is there to call a buffet?”

“Buffet... Maybe you could call it... A buffet?”

“Buffet? No, that's just lame, isn't it?”

ROYAL
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Nishino looked particularly concerned about the plate full of crabs.

“The details don't matter. I was looking forward to the buffet, you know.”

“Why don't you take the other students into consideration? Crab is one of the signature dishes.”

“What? If you do that, other people will take it. Besides, it's all-you-can-eat, so I'm sure they have plenty of it.”

Well, that was a fair point.

Ishizaki turned around and pointed to where the chef was busily refilling the boiled crabs. Worst of all, if he could eat it all, she has no right to stop him.

“Agh, whatever.”

Nishino averted her gaze from Ishizaki and scooped from her bowl of steamed rice and brought it to her mouth with a spoon.

Albert, who was quietly eating next to her, ate a variety of food. The lineup included soaked eggplant, spinach with sesame paste, various sashimi, miso soup and rice. No matter how you looked at it, it was all Japanese food.

“So, you like Japanese food.”

Albert carefully lined up his chopsticks, set them down, and silently gave a thumbs up. Then he quickly returned to his meal. He ate very carefully, more so than Ishizaki, who ate in gulps.

“Oh right, Ayanokōji, aren't you in the same group as Ryūen-san?”

“Yes. I'm not doing anything special. Thanks to the good support of the other group members, we're reasonably well organized.”

“You sound like you don't know about the ruckus at the ski resort.”

As one of the parties involved, Nishino recalled with a fed-up look.

“I heard you got into some kind of trouble with guys from another school. Damn, I wish I was there!”

“If you had been there, it would've been even worse. I don't know why men are so quick to fight.”

That being said, Nishino was looking pretty heroic as well.

She spoke back without fear to interject between Yamamura and the guys, as if she was a shield for her.

“You're also a woman with some hot blood, aren't you?” Ishizaki laughed while chewing on a crab.

“You're so annoying. Don't let scraps of food fly. They're so dirty.”

“You're not bothering Ryūen-san, are you?”

“You can be as paranoid as you want, but why should I obey him too?”

She and Ishizaki seemed to get along well with each other despite their bickering tone. She was indeed a classmate who knew her stuff. She was also kind-hearted, considering how she showed a certain amount of concern for Yamamura.

“I've always wondered, isn't Nishino afraid of Ryūen-san?”

“Well, when he's serious, he does seem menacing. My idiot brother was also a delinquent, so maybe I have built a tolerance.”

So she had a similar type of person in her family? That would explain why she was so forceful in her retorts during the fight.

“It's so obvious that if you don't get it right while you're a student, you're going to have a hard time. My brother was a stupid flirt, dropped out of high school, couldn't find a good job, and had quite a hard time.” She kept on sighing heavily, as if she didn't want to be reminded of it.

“What happened to him?”

“A local construction company picked him up, and he's working hard every day at their site. He's getting paid a low salary, though.”

Because she witnessed a similar reality up close and personal, she could only sigh when she thought of Ryūen and Ishizaki's future.

They would have a hard time later on due to doing what they wanted now. Common sense applied regardless of whether someone was a delinquent or not. Except in the entertainment and creative industries, where talent is important, and in the sports industry, where physical ability is vital, it's definitely better to have a good academic background.

The more effort you put in your studies, the more likely it is that you'll be able to start from an easier position later.

“You're pretty smart for someone who looks like that.”

“I don't need to look like this. Besides, I only seem smart from your point of view.”

“Ha-ha! You're probably right!”

From Ishizaki's point of view, it seems that almost every student would be an honor student.

As I was leaving the venue after finishing my meal, I noticed Katsuragi.

He was eating alone at a table in the corner, silently bringing food to his mouth. I was curious about his situation, so I observed him for a bit, which led me to see a strange scene.

Oda, a student from Ryūen's class, spotted Katsuragi and was about to go and talk to him, when Matoba and Baba, Class A students, intervened to stop him. After they spoke to him, Oda went to another student while still paying attention to Katsuragi. It was as if they were trying to prevent Oda from contacting Katsuragi. It happened not just once, but two or three times.

Matoba was a member of the second group, the same as Katsuragi. It wouldn't be surprising if he was sitting at the table with Katsuragi, but he was doing the exact opposite. It seems that some of the Class A students do some pretty insidious things.

I could've left it alone, but I decided to try contacting Katsuragi. Matoba,

sensing my approach, quickly came up to me.

“I'm in the middle of a little group activity with Katsuragi. Can you leave him alone?”

I see. If he told others it was the second group's problem, even Katsuragi's classmates would have to back off.

That was probably why Oda immediately understood and left.

Was this the consensus of Class A, or was this just Matoba's selfish behavior? And behind the scenes, were there intentions to defeat Ryūen's class? Either way, to a third party, this behavior could only be seen as insidious bullying.

A new visitor appeared in front of Matoba, as he was giving me a warning. Matoba turned his body around to stop him in the same way, but he quickly dismissed that idea.

“Oh!” He gulped and turned away, as if he had never interfered from the start.

“Hey, Katsuragi. You're eating with a very shabby look on your face, aren't you?”

No wonder Matoba couldn't speak to him. The visitor was Ryūen. He clicked his tongue a little at the unexpected appearance of the Class C's leader and immediately ran away.

Without even sparing Matoba a glance, he took a seat in front of Katsuragi.

“I'm eating. What do you want?”

“I wanted to take a closer look at your miserable face.”

“I don't understand.”

“I don't understand'. That's what it means to betray your class. It's too late to regret it now, Katsuragi.

“I have no regrets. I'm ready to die with the current class.”

Perhaps he was hiding his true thoughts, but I could tell that he was firmly aware of his status as a member of the Ryūen class, even though his words were a bit distant.

“I see.”

Ryūen pulled out a chair with a thud and sat down in front of me, sliding an empty glass to me.

“Bring me some water, Ayanokōji.”

“Me?”

“You don't have to be afraid of me in the slightest when I'm dealing with you in public. It's so much easier.”

“I know you've been domineering towards people since we started the group... But you've never been like that towards me.”

“Don't worry about it, I'll start now.”

I'm not sure how much I would be able to find out about their situation.

I was thirsty as well, so it was convenient.
I also caught a glimpse of Ryūen's concern for Katsuragi, who was eating alone.
So for now, I'll settle with that.

2

Ryūen, Katsuragi, and I were leaving the dining hall. I saw Kushida sitting quietly on a waiting chair near the entrance.

Kushida stood up as soon as she spotted the three of us and approached us without hesitation.

“Ryūen-kun, may I have a word with you?”

It seems she had been waiting here for Ryūen to come out. It was hard to believe that the girls left after finishing their food before Kushida, who would have typically gone with her friends.

I'm sure she had something she wanted to talk to Ryūen about and was preparing for it. Katsuragi, perhaps reading the mood, quickly returned to his room by himself.

“Huh? What do you want?”

“It's... Here, I'd like to go somewhere else, is that okay?”

Kushida was in her usual public mode because of the setting, but her behavior was a little strange.

“I'm sorry, but you're not my cup of tea.”

“Haha, that's not what I meant. I mean, don't worry. I don't want you to die, yet.”

Kushida, while being cautious of her surroundings, turned her murderous intent toward Ryūen.

“Well, okay, I'll at least listen to you. I'd better get rid of the troublemaker, right?”

The troublemaker was, of course, me. The two of them walked side by side toward a deserted area.

If I left them alone, things were going to take a turn for the worse. I decided to follow them, ensuring they were completely oblivious to my presence. However, I paid close attention. It was the right decision to be cautious, judging from Ryūen's appearance along the way, with him showing signs of being concerned about what was behind him.

“So? What do you want to talk about after going through all the trouble of being alone with me?”

“It's about my relationship with Ryūen-kun. Even when we were working as a group, you sometimes said unnecessary things. Can you please stop that kind of thing?”

As far as I could tell, Ryūen had, on two occasions, threatened to light a fuse under Kushida. It was no wonder she didn't take kindly to that.

“What do you want with me?”

“What do I want? I ain't got no plans to do anything about you at the moment.”

“So you mean you're going to do something about me someday?”

From the sound of her voice, Kushida didn't seem fully composed.

“You sold your soul to the devil because you wanted to expel Suzune, didn't you? Of course, that comes with risks. You can't just pretend the past didn't happen now, can you?”

“Yes, you're right. I believe that's true.”

“I'm sure the old you wouldn't have thought to call me out here even if I had provoked you, right?”

Ryūen sensed something was wrong. He was likely oblivious to what happened during the Unanimous Vote Special Exam, but he must've sensed something from his keen perception.

“By any chance, did someone who knows your true nature appear?”

“You can speculate all you want, but you're wrong.”

“Kukuku. Either way, you're one of the keys to my class strategy. Whenever I have to deal with Suzune's class, I'll use this weapon without mercy.”

He intentionally avoided mentioning Kushida so far. He intended to leave it as one of the measures to effectively inflict damage during more important situations in the future. This was an obstacle for Kushida, who decided to get back on her feet and help the class for her own sake.

The connection couldn't be easily removed and would continue to torment her.

“What are you going to do? Do you plan to get down on your knees and ask me to keep my mouth shut? Or are you going to try and expel me? Both of those are going to be difficult.”

“I'm...”

Neither of those options were things I was going to let Kushida choose.

Even if a third choice were to appear, it would result in the same thing.

“I'm sorry, Ryūen, but I'm going to have to ask you to back off on this one.”

I decided to stop hiding and expose myself.

“Damn. I knew you were following me.”

“Ayanokōji-kun?”

“I already knew you would be wary of me.”

“Well, that's okay. So? What did you mean when you asked me to back off of Kushida?”

“I meant exactly what I said. I know you're going to tell everyone about Kushida, but I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't.”

Ryūen laughed and clapped his hands in amusement at the warning.

“Kukuku! What, Ayanokōji, you're also in on it, aren't you? And if you say

so, that means she's no longer cancerous to your class like before.”

Ryūen pleasantly smiled, having gotten an answer to his question up to this point.

“That's right. Kushida is now taking a new step forward as Horikita's classmate. I'm not going to let you destroy that with your provocations.”

“Sorry, but this is getting even more interesting. I'm not going to let you ruin it with your interference.”

“No one will believe a word you say, Ryūen-kun.”

Kushida unbearably confronted him, but Ryūen didn't back down.

“That's not true. You won't know until you try.”

What was needed now wasn't a half-hearted verbal deterrent, but complete restriction of movement.

“If I decide to expose you, there is nothing anyone can do to stop me.”

He tapped Kushida on the shoulder. She couldn't hide her anxiety and humiliation.

“But if you do that, you won't be able to achieve your goal of fighting Sakayanagi in the final exams.”

“Oh? I don't see why that would be the case.”

“I'll have to deal with it in a way you don't want me to,” I said.

As if in response to my words, Ryūen's smile instantly faded.

Just like when he once fearlessly abducted Kei, or even more so.

“Ha. What the hell, it's been a long time since you've shown me that face.”

I intervened between Ryūen and Kushida and pushed Ryūen even more.

“Even if you choose to remain silent here and now, there's no guarantee that you won't expose me later, you know?”

Kushida looked strong, but then lightly raised her hands.

“Let's not talk about this. I'm not going to use Kikyō's story to attack your class in the first place. If Ayanokōji wasn't involved, it could have been a weapon.”

“What do you mean...?”

“You don't know this, but he told me yesterday that he was no longer going to expel you. That's why I won't be able to attack you using that.”

“That's right, I've already thought of a countermeasure for that situation.”

“It's meaningless if I hit you with a strategy that doesn't work and lose out because of it, right? It's been my experience that a half-baked approach won't work if I want to defeat you.”

I'm sure that he'll challenge Horikita's class to a fight with a strategy that I can't even think of.

“I'm going back to my room now. Bye Kushida, enjoy the rest of your school life as much as you can.”

The way he called her was changed from Kikyō to Kushida. I was interested to see what he would do in the future.

Kushida and I were the only ones left in the area, and silence reigned.

“Why did you come to help me? There’s no merit for you, is there?”

“There are advantages. You’re an indispensable person for the class. I don't think Ryūen would have had any intention of exposing you even if I hadn't come here, but I didn't know how you would react. I'm sure you were wondering if there was any way you could prevent him from talking.”

“That’s... Well...”

“Ryūen is not your match. You're going to get yourself in trouble if you get into a fight that you aren't prepared for and get completely defeated. That's why I decided to show up.”

“You mean you could handle that guy?”

“At least at this stage, I don't consider Ryūen as a strong opponent.”

“How...?”

“Anyway, you don't have to cross any more dangerous bridges. You should take good care of yourself now.”

“That's hard to believe. Do you really need me in your class that badly?”

“There's that too.”

“That too?”

“I feel that I can be closer with Kushida, who can now speak more freely.”

Being aware of both sides of Kushida's personality also made it easier to guess what she was thinking.

“Stop it. How can someone who knows my true nature really think that way?”

I'm sure she’s acutely aware that she has a personality that people wouldn't like.

“Not really. You’re honestly likable.”

“I don't know how serious you are. You can't be trusted.”

Normally Kushida would've laughed and answered, but her expression was firm.

“It's true. There are people in this world who feel more comfortable with your true nature.”

“There isn't...”

Kushida looked at me, opened her mouth wide, and stopped moving.

Then she suddenly started walking towards the wall.

“What are you doing?”

Immediately after that, she spread her arms out, palms open, and then slammed her hands on the wall as hard as she could.

“It's okay, it's okay...”

She mumbled something and stopped moving. As I watched her, Kushida turned back to me, having regained her composure.

“I got a little dizzy, but I'm fine! I'm fine!”

Kushida raised her voice in a strange manner. I was slightly disturbed by what I just saw.

“Are you sure you're okay?”

Even though she didn't seem to be in a normal state, Kushida showed her usual front.

“Yeah. I'm fine!”

“Oh, I see.”

Reading Kushida's emotions was really difficult.

“I've kind of been saved by Ayanokōji-kun, haven't I? Thanks for...”

“I feel like I've been getting more and more thank-you's from you lately.”

“Maybe so. I'll try not to get involved with Ryūen-kun from now on.”

“That's good.”

“Well, I'm going back to my room. I'll see you tomorrow.”

“See you then.”

Kushida walked down the hallway with an expression that seemed to have completely returned to normal.

On the way, however, she stumbled and fell down again, and one of her slippers flew off.

“Are you okay?”

“I'm fine! I'm fine! Don't worry!”

She shooed me away with her hand, telling me not to approach her. She then staggered back to her feet and put her slipper back on.

3

I was waiting with my back against the wall in the hallway outside the guest room, ready for my appointment with Horikita.

“Sorry, I'm a little late.”

Horikita appeared while voicing an apology, but it wasn't a problem since she wasn't too late.

“I'll get right to it...”

“Are we going to have a long talk here?”

Students were constantly entering and leaving various rooms nearby.

It was one of the least suitable places to talk about things you don't want to be overheard.

“It's certainly not a good place to talk. It can't be helped, I guess. Let's go to the vending machine for a drink. It would be nice to talk while we walk around, wouldn't it?”

That was probably the safer thing to do. I agreed since I had no objection.

Standing around talking attracted a lot of attention, but I didn't have to worry about that if we were chatting while walking.

“There is a vending machine in front of the baths that sells fruit milk. It's delicious.”

It was something to drink after bathing, and I thought that it tasted very nice.

“Thanks for the childish comment. But I don't think it's something to drink in the middle of the night.”

Was it something specific to a time of day? Maybe that was only the case from a girl's point of view.

“But it's farther to the vending machines in the big bathroom, so let's go that way.”

Horikita's steps were slow, but she wanted to prioritize talking anyway.

“About the cultural festival the other day. I'm sure I didn't get a chance to talk to you about it. It's been nagging at me for a long time, but I couldn't find a good time until today.”

“I guess I was just too tired at the time, and it looked like you were exposing your defenseless sleeping face to the world.”

“Do you want to be kicked?”

Her spirited upper body posture immediately pushed me to raise the white flag.

“Give me a break.”

“I can't believe a boy saw me sleeping. You've just tarnished my reputation.”

“Why do you care so much?”

“It’s something to worry about... But that's not important right now. What I want to hear is regarding that day.”

Shrugging off her own shame with a hand gesture, Horikita adopted a stern expression.

“The events that happened that day in the student council room—weren't you involved in those series of events?”

‘The festival’, ‘that day’, ‘the student council room’, there was only one event that she could be referring to.

“Did you arrange it so that Yagami-kun was expelled?”

“Why do you think that?”

I was interested in the reason why she came to that conclusion.

“I'm not sure if you knew, but there was a possibility that Yagami-kun was trying to get you expelled. In fact, his words and actions in the student council room were enough to support that.”

Horikita, in her own way, seemed to have a few pieces that I didn't know about. I wouldn't be surprised if she had discovered some things in the process of putting them together.

“I didn't know about Yagami, but I guess I shouldn't be surprised. You knew firsthand that Hōsen was trying to get me expelled, didn't you?”

“Twenty million private points, that was the prize.”

“And Yagami was in on it, and was vigilantly watching and hoping for an opportunity to win it?”

“I thought about that too. But there were too many peculiar points. Above all, he didn't seem to be approaching you because of a reward.”

It seemed that Horikita, who was present at the scene, knew more about this.

“I'm curious about the answers to each of my questions. But that's not what I want to know most.”

“Then what do you want to know?”

“Who you are. I can't possibly think of you as a normal student like the rest.”

“That's a very troubling question. What kind of student would I be if I wasn't normal?”

“I don't understand. I'm not talking about whether you're brilliant or not. I just can't imagine what kind of person you are at all. I just don't understand.”

What kind of person is Ayanokōji Kiyotaka? Is that what you want to know?

“There's nothing special to talk about. I don't have anything that's worth mentioning.”

“Well, if I ask you, will you answer my questions, one at a time? Where are you from? Which elementary and middle schools did you graduate from? Have

you participated in any competitions or other events in the past? Have you studied on your own, or have you received tutoring or private tutoring?"

I'm sure people wouldn't even ask for this much detail on a blind date.

"I see what you mean, but I don't think I'm ready to tackle that many troublesome questions."

Horikita looked away, her lips pursed blatantly showing her frustration.

"I'll disclose some information."

"What kind of information?"

"For example, I was involved in the Yagami case that you're so interested in."

"You're not kidding, are you? Because Yagami-kun was trying to get you expelled from school?"

"I didn't know it was Yagami, to be precise. It would be more correct to say that I set a trap for a student who was planning to expel me, and Yagami fell for it. I was the one who set the whole thing up. I had it all set up so they wouldn't be able to make any half-hearted excuses."

Until now, I wouldn't have found any meaning in telling this to Horikita. But by indirectly showing her what kind of person I am, I could give her information.

When we meet again, I will have the opportunity to make use of it.

"By the way, there's no connection between the student council president and Ryūen. I approached them individually."

"I think I know what it is... That made me feel so uncomfortable at the time."

We took the stairs up to the second floor where the large baths were located, arriving at a rest area with vending machines thereafter. There were two female teachers monopolizing the two massage chairs.

They were giving themselves over to the massage with relaxed expressions and didn't seem to notice us.



ROYAL
MTLS

They made eye contact with us. I could've ignored them, but Horikita chose to call out to them.

"You two seem quite at home."

"Huh? Ah, it's Horikita-san, isn't it~"

Hoshinomiya-sensei replied, raising only her wrist in a flutter.

"Isn't it still before the students' bedtime? Aren't the teachers on duty?"

"Too bad~ Tonight we're kind of on a half day off~ Right, Sae-chan?"

"It's as she says."

Chabashira-sensei surrendered herself to the rattling massage chair and closed her eyes in comfort.

"Does it feel that good?"

I had always been interested in using it, but since it was adjacent to the main bathroom, I couldn't due to the stares from students who frequently came and went.

"As you get older and more mature, massages become indispensable. There are a lot of hardships that you young people wouldn't understand."

It's said that along with physical decline comes the need for equipment to compensate for it.

"Especially in Sae-chan's case, her shoulders are very stiff."

"There's no need for you to say anything unnecessary like that."

For a moment, the teachers exchanged sharp glances.

"By the way, Horikita-san, you've totally become a leader. Are you still comfortable in Class B? Ah, how could a former homeroom teacher of Class B ask you such a question?"

"It isn't good. What I'm aiming for is Class A. This is merely a checkpoint."

"I see."

I put the conversation aside and picked up the remote control connected to Chabashira-sensei's massage machine.

There seemed to be five levels of intensity. Naturally, the stronger the intensity, the better the effect. Somehow, I was curious about how the fifth level of intensity would feel, so I tried adjusting it.

"Nn, hya, nn, nn!"

The machine began to make a strong sound.

I thought it was actually about a 40% increase in functionality, but it might be more than that.

"Ah, Ayanokōji, what are you doing, nnnn! No... Put it back down!" She reached for the remote control, clearly panicked.

The remote fell out of my hand as she forcibly yanked on the cord.

"Ugh! Hya, ha... Make it stop, quick!"

I picked up the remote control and decreased the strength from level 5 back to level 3.

“Haa, haa... Haa, haa... What the hell were you doing?!”

“I was kind of curious. I thought the stronger the better it would be.”

“Of course not! There’s a strength that suits each person!”

She scolded me angrily, her face bright red, with a devilish expression I had never seen before. Apparently, the stimulation was much more than she had expected.

“What are you playing at?”

I was also warned by Horikita for the noisy exchange.

“Sorry to interrupt you during your break. Let's go, Ayanokōji-kun.”

“Are you two going to take a bath now? You can't go in together.”

Horikita tried to turn away, ignoring Hoshinomiya-sensei's comment about something stupid.

“Wait, Horikita-san.”

Hoshinomiya-sensei, who had been joking until just now, found herself switching to a serious expression.

“Indeed, I think Horikita-san's class is making remarkable progress; Class B is just a stopping point, and you need to aim for Class A. It's obvious, but I think that's wonderful and very admirable too.”

Her words sounded like praise, but there were other implications.

“Chie, don't say anything unnecessary.”

“It doesn't matter. I'm just trying to say what I think.”

“I don't know what you want to say, but you’re not free to say whatever you’re thinking.”

“Please say it.”

Horikita urged, as if she was curious about Hoshinomiya-sensei's earlier words.

“Then I'll speak freely. As a homeroom teacher with a class, I have always thought that teachers from Class A to Class D are also competing with each other. If I were to use an analogy, you could think of it as if the teachers were playing Daifugō with each other.”

“Daifugō...?”

“You know the rules, right?”

“Yes, well...”

“You play a hand of cards that you've been dealt, and you fight for three years to determine who comes in first through fourth. The cards are numbered from 1 to 13, and the players play them against each other. Leaving aside the local rules and special rules, basically, the cards with larger numbers are stronger and the cards with smaller numbers are weaker, right? If a student with only 3s clashes with a student with 6s, of course the student with 6s wins. In Mashima’s Class A, the cards in his hand are all in order, and he is dealt more 10s and 11s. On the other

hand, the further you go down to Class D, the more 3s and 4s there are. Well, it's just like the usual school tradition.”

Saying this, Hoshinomiya-sensei picked up the message machine’s remote control and increased the strength of the vibration by one level.

It was only at level three.

“Of course the students change from day to day; I'm sure some who were worth 3 or 4 will grow up and become 12 or 13, or in rare cases, the strongest number, 2. So class fluctuations do happen, and sometimes Class D can move up to Class B. Well, it's extremely rare though. But the important thing is to fight equally. Every class is always fighting within the numbers 1 through 13. You don't want there to be any unfairness or cheating in any particular class, do you?”

“Yes.”

“But you know what? Don't you think there’s one card in your class that shouldn't be mixed in?”

“The card that shouldn't be mixed...?”

Hoshinomiya-sensei laughed and turned her gaze to me.

“Yes, it's cheating. Sae-chan's class is the only one with a joker.”

[TL Note: The joker is the strongest card if included, otherwise, 2 is the strongest card]

Horikita also noticed her pointed stare.

“Chie. Stop it already.”

“You must be tempted to argue. Even if I'm trying my best to use my head and fight, a single joker will turn the situation upside down. No, it's much worse than playing Daifugō. Because you can play the joker over and over and over again, unlike the other games where you use it once and it's gone from your hand. There’s no way we can win.”

As a homeroom teacher, this could be seen as a declaration of defeat for her class.

“Regardless of whether your statement is right or wrong, what are you going to do if the Class D students hear it?”

This was an admission of defeat. If the students in Ichinose's class were to hear this, they’d be shocked.

“I see. Sorry, sorry. Maybe I got a little drunk from the massage.”

With that, she powered it off.

“You got the joker because you and Sae were lucky. It's not cheating if you use it to reach Class A, right?”

It was obvious to everyone here that she was bitter.

“Mhhh~.”

It was a voice like no other I'd ever heard before, almost seeming frightened. Perhaps her drunkenness cooled off for a moment after that, as she jumped up in a hurry.

“I'm going back to my room! Sayonara!”

Slightly peeved, Hoshinomiya-sensei waved her hand and walked down the corridor with long strides.

“I'm sorry for everything. As she said herself, she must've had a little bit of alcohol in her system.”

Chabashira-sensei said as she got up from the massager, as if defending Hoshinomiya-sensei.

“That's fine. I'll consider it as the ramblings of a drunk.”

Horikita replied in a casual, harsh tone, and Chabashira-sensei coughed, a little flustered.

“That's pretty harsh.”

“Sensei, you seem to be a little concerned about what she said earlier.”

“It's not that I don't think about it, to be honest. The situation is too different from that of the class I taught three years ago.”

It's true that Horikita's class had a strong hand.

“I don't know whether or not Ayanokōji-kun's a joker, but there's no denying that he's a powerful classmate. However, I'm not going to hold back on that.”

Without even looking at us, Horikita conveyed her thoughts to Chabashira-sensei.

“As long as it's a card that was dealt to the class, I will use it to fight with all my might. The place we're aiming for is Class A, you know.”

“That's right. I would expect nothing less...”

However, I'm sure Chabashira-sensei herself was thinking that she still may not have the upper hand.

Class A, led by Sakayanagi, also has an abundance of solid cards available. Even if we could win just one match, there's no telling what will happen if we play 10 or 20 rounds.

“Well, I'm going after Chie. If I let her go like that, she might drink heavily until the sun rises.”

She couldn't seem to give up on her former classmate, so she followed after her.

“That's all for today, Horikita.”

“I still have a lot more to ask you, though, don't I? Mr. Joker.”

“I've come this far, and I want to take another bath. Besides, more people are coming.”

A few students were beginning to show up to enjoy the hot tub before going

to bed.

“You'll answer my questions later. Am I correct in assuming that?”

I nodded my head, and then passed through the curtains that led to the men's bath.

4

It was nearly 11:00 p.m., almost lights out.

Kitō stood up silently and headed down the hallway, grabbing several magazines he had borrowed.

“That guy reads almost the whole time he's in his room, doesn't he?”

I guess a book lover enjoys reading. Unlike Hiyori and I, he didn't seem to be the type to read books from the library. A few minutes later, Kitō returned with a new magazine in his hand. I wondered if it was so he could read it right away when he woke up in the morning. The magazines Kitō read strongly depicted his personal taste, and most of them were what one would call fashion magazines.

“Can I read some of them too?”

I thought he would tell me to get it myself, but Kitō silently put the magazine on the table. Did this mean I could read whatever I wanted?

I decided to read the magazine for a little while, as I had about 10 minutes left before lights out.

The magazine featured things such as trendy clothing and accessories. To be honest, the pictures and the articles in the magazine were quite interesting, even though I didn't really understand the meaning behind them. However, I could tell that Kitō had a strong attachment to the magazine. Kitō's outfits, which may seem eccentric in fashion, were arranged with his own sense of style and feelings in mind.

Soon it was time for lights out, and we darkened the room and went to bed.

After quietly staring up at the ceiling for a while, my vision gradually became accustomed to the darkness.

It seemed that no one was asleep yet, and I wondered what they were thinking.

“We're going to be senior high school students in half a year, and even though we're competing for Class A, we still have to think about the future—like going on to college or getting a job. I still can't imagine myself after graduating from high school. There's nothing in particular that I want to do. What about you, Ayanokōji?” Watanabe asked.

“I'm going on to higher education... But I haven't decided on a specific university yet.”

I talked about a goal that would be safest.

“What about you, Kitō?”

I guess I wasn't sure I could get an answer, but Watanabe asked without hesitation.

“I'm going to become a fashion designer.”

“What?!”

Watanabe was doubly surprised, both by the fact that he received an answer and by the contents of it.

“I know you must think it's surprising. You can't imagine that from my appearance.”

“No, no, well, it's hard to say...”

But considering Kitō's taste in personal clothing and the contents of the magazines he read, it's easy to see.

“Kukuku, it would've been easier for Watanabe to accept if I had said that he would be an assassin.”

I was worried that Kitō might get angry again at Ryūen's sideways lashing, but I didn't hear any response.

“Don't worry about it, Kitō. Ryūen always says harsh things.”

Watanabe followed up, but Kitō didn't seem to really care.

“I'm used to it. Most people are surprised and unconvinced when I talk about my dreams. I don't expect them to readily accept me if I pursue that path honestly.”

Prejudice was something that shouldn't exist, but it certainly did in this world. For the strong and stern-faced Kitō, aiming for some professions may be a natural hurdle to overcome.

“But it doesn't matter if you graduate with Class A. You can jump into that world with no questions asked. Once you jump in, all you have to do is silence those around you with your skills.”

For Kitō, breaking through the initial barrier was what he considered to be the most difficult obstacle.

“You're seriously thinking about the future, aren't you? No, it's great, you have a proper dream.”

Watanabe was surprised, but he also felt admiration and was inspired by Kitō, whose thoughts were more determined than his own.

Children will grow older and have to go out into the world. The same was true for Watanabe, who had no goals at the moment, and for Ryūen, who didn't speak.

“It's kind of hard to do when you think of *that*... You know what I mean?”

Watanabe muttered to the ceiling in a voice that sounded like a bitter laugh.

“Everyone here's from a different class, right? That means, normally, only one of the four of us could graduate in Class A. I'm assuming you have a dream that you want to fulfill, but, you know, if I take that seat, someone else can't accomplish their dream.”

Classmates can share a dream with each other. But you can't share your dreams with your rivals. That's how this school works. Some laugh, some cry.

I wonder if this was the kind of talk that happened when students of the same age spent the night together.

It was a night that reminded me of the time I spent talking with Keisei and my friends at last year's camp.

Chapter 5: School Trip: Fourth Day

THE MORNING OF THE fourth day of the school trip. We were going to return to school tomorrow.

As this was our second completely free day, we wanted to make sure it was a day we made the most of. The results of yesterday's spot tour were that 10 groups, or half of the total 20 groups, scored more than 20 points, and all of them earned 30,000 private points.

On the other hand, the members of Group 15, to which both Mii-chan and Miyamoto belonged, were disqualified because they failed to meet the time limit, so they had to sit for a study session at the inn. I felt a little sorry for them, but it couldn't be helped. As soon as the study session ends, I hope they get the opportunity to soak in the hot springs and enjoy their last day as much as possible.

It was cleaning time in the main baths, so I quickly changed my clothes. I thought I would watch TV as I did yesterday, but it seemed that Kitō was the first to return today, and he was staring at the screen as if he were devouring it. I didn't know the details, but it seemed to be a feature on fashion that Kitō was interested in.

“Hey, Ayanokōji. They're going to have a snowball fight outside.”

“Snowball fight?”

Watanabe, who had also finished getting dressed, showed me his cell phone. It seemed that there were a lot of people who wanted to have an unrestricted snowball fight.

“Sounds fun, let's go check it out.”

“What about Ryūen and Kitō?”

Kitō was too engrossed in the TV to answer, and Ryūen didn't hesitate in going to the reserved seat in the room to make his pass explicit.

“Then let's go, just us two.”

“Right.”

We left Kitō and Ryūen, who mixed like oil and water, in the room, but I'll trust their maturity here. When I went outside the ryokan with Watanabe, a large group of students had already gathered.

“Good morning, Kiyotaka-kun, Watanabe-kun.”

Yōsuke, standing near the entrance and clutching his cell phone, called out to us.

“There's quite a lot of people here. Was everyone that interested in a snowball fight?”

“I don't think it's simply that. It's like a snowball fight for private points. The

only qualification to participate is to pay 1,000 points. The winning team gets the points from the losing team.”

I see. So if you lose, you sacrifice little, and if you win, you get money to buy an extra souvenir or two. No wonder it was a very casual but reasonably exciting event.

“Is this okay? Even though we have a large space, it's on the inn's property.”

“Yes. I asked them about it and they said it's fine since it's early in the day. I think the fact that it's a private place with no one staying here except us school students is also a big factor.”

The rules remained the same, simple and clear: no catching, only dodging. Students who are hit by a snowball must leave the field. However, the snowball must be of a certain size, and if, for example, it's in powder form and is thrown like a shotgun bullet, or if the ball scatters in the air, it would be invalid even if it hits. As for being hit by a snowball, it seems that both self-reporting and the referee's official judgment will be taken into account.

Well, not many people would intentionally cheat for the sake of a few private points.

“How many are planning to compete?”

“About 30 people so far. Will you join in, Ayanokōji-kun?”

“No, I'm...”

I was about to decline, but then I thought that if I pass on participating this time, I may never get another chance to have a snowball fight again in my life.

“I'd like to try, but I don't have a team.”

“That's okay. I'll assign people to the teams that don't have enough people.

It seemed that Yōsuke would take care of all the troublesome details, for which I was very grateful.

Or perhaps that was why he stayed near the entrance. It was a lot of trouble to take care of things on your own, but Yōsuke was probably more comfortable with having everything under control.

As I waited for the deadline, which was only about 10 minutes away, I saw Horikita, who must've heard about the snowball fight in the ryokan.

“I've heard about it, but there's quite a gathering here.”

“Are you going to join us too?”

“Well, it's a very special school excursion. I'd like to join if there's space.”

She originally had no intention of doing so, but she seemed to have changed her mind when she saw that the event was more successful than she had imagined.

“Then let's play, Horikita!”

Ibuki came out of the crowd and challenged Horikita to a game, as if she had been waiting for her.

“You're here too, Ibuki. You really come out of nowhere, don't you? But

that's okay. It's just a game after all, and I can play with you if you want.”

As soon as she replied, Ibuki clenched her fists.

“Losing is losing, no matter if it's just a game or not. Don't come up with excuses later on like a little kid, okay?”

“I'm going to say that line right back at you.”

Yōsuke seemed to be watching the two of them closely, and when they stole a glance at their cell phones, they saw that they had been assigned to different teams. It wouldn't be very exciting if they were on the same team.

While I was checking the teams, I whispered into Yōsuke's ear and asked him for a little favor.

“Good morning, everyone!”

Kushida appeared with Yamamura, Nishino, and Amikura.

“That's great, Kushida. You invited Yamamura and the others.”

“Eh? Well, yeah.”

I thought she was going to give me her usual smile, but she averted her eyes and gave me a muddled reply. However, she smiled immediately thereafter.

“I said I wouldn't leave my room until Nishino-san and Yamamura-san went out, so it's a good opportunity.”

“That's the right response.”

We had spent time as a group so far, and our relationship was improving, albeit gradually. Whether you participated or watched, it was more meaningful to spend the same time together.

“Do you want to join us?”

Ibuki asked Kushida.

“Hmm? A snowball fight?”

“Yes. It's been decided that Horikita and I will fight.”

“I see. But I don't think I will. I don't want to hit someone with a snowball. I can't throw that kind of thing because I'd feel sorry for them.”

“Huh?”

Ibuki made a disgusted gesture, as if she was deeply offended by Kushida's attitude.

Seeing this, Horikita immediately struck Ibuki's side with a chop.

“What the hell! What're you doing!?”

“I'm your opponent, right? If you keep thinking about anything unnecessary, you're going to lose easily.”

“Of course I'm not going to lose. I'll make you cry for sure!”

I see. I had thought that the distance between Horikita and Kushida had decreased recently, but it seems that Ibuki was also involved. The three of them had a distorted relationship, but strangely enough, it may be having a good cleansing effect on them.

The number of participating students continued to slowly increase until finally there were 42 students split into six teams. Each team had seven students, and four teams were created by themselves.

Two teams were made up of stragglers like me. We didn't play in a tournament format; instead, we just played one match each. Yōsuke may have been thinking about the excitement of the event, so he assigned Ibuki and Horikita to the third and final match of the day.

First up was a seven-member boys' team led by Ishizaki.

On the other side was a team of seven boys led by Sudō. It was truly a clash of men.

As soon as they started, snowballs powerfully flew from side to side. With 14 snowballs being thrown at once, it was difficult for everyone to avoid them. Within 10 or so seconds, a total of six boys from both teams were eliminated. Incidentally, Ishizaki, who had been so excited the whole time, was also hit within 10 seconds.

On the other hand, Sudō seemed to have put his frustration at being rejected by Horikita into the snowballs, launching them one after another. However, Ishizaki's team had Albert, who was agile enough to avoid the snowballs, and he had been working hard to defeat the other team.

Yamamura was quietly watching the exhilarating battle, so I drew a little closer.

“They're getting excited, aren't they?”

Her expression was the same as usual, with very little change, but she seemed to be enjoying herself.

“Ah, it seems so.” Yamamura said so as she exhaled into her palms.

Her hands weren't wearing the gloves she had supposedly bought back at the ski resort.

“Perhaps you forgot your gloves again?”

“Yes, I did.”

I tried to take off my gloves, but Yamamura stopped me.

“I'm sorry, I'm just kidding. I brought my own gloves.”

With that, she pulled her gloves out of her pocket. She was smiling, but only slightly.

“I didn't realize you were a comedian.”

“I suppose it doesn't really suit our relationship, does it?”

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Instantly her smile faded and she concluded that it was an unnecessary comment.

“No, it's fine. I feel like we've formed a bit of a bond as a group.”

It was a change that would've been unthinkable, at least from the first day.

“I also felt that. I've always been in the shadows, so it was less likely that people would pay attention to anything I did... Kushida-san, Nishino-san, Amikura-san. They all took a good look at me and included me in their group. I'm thankful for them.”

Without the school trip, their impression of Yamamura would've remained tenuous until she graduated.

It was a good, memorable school trip, both for Yamamura and for the other girls. There must've been a lot of students in other groups who were closing the distance in a similar way.

When Yamamura finished putting her gloves on both hands, she turned and held them out in my direction.

“It's not just the girls, it's the boys too. It was a little different from the image I had expected.”

Unlike the first day we were in the group, Yamamura's demeanor had a softness to it. Of course, this change was slightly less than that of the other students, but it was a clear change.

“So the school trip, which I thought was long at first, is over today?”

“Yes.”

During a school trip spent with people you dislike, time would definitely have felt terribly long and slow. However, just by recognizing them as members who aren't uncomfortable to be around, a change comes over you that makes it hard to believe that time was passing normally.

“Surely you're not the only one that's changed. Kitō, Watanabe, Amikura and Nishino must've also changed to some extent after this experience.”

The group had its share of trouble, but that had spiced things up in some ways.

“Little by little, I think Kitō-kun's curses for Ryūen-kun are decreasing.”

“Hmm.”

“Ever since we formed the group, he's been saying things like 'I'm going to kill you' and 'I'm going to send you to hell.'”

Those were very disturbing things to say. Well, it wasn't so much that the two of them had become friends, but rather that they had bumped into each other so much that their senses have numbed.

However, the image I had of Kito changed a lot. I originally thought that he wasn't the type to talk at all, but when I got closer to him, I found that he spoke a lot more than I expected.

There may have been a lot of problems with what he said, but it was understandable why. The students in Sakayanagi and Ryūen's classes were especially wary of each other.

There were almost no opportunities to see the other in a positive light.

“Tokitō is also very close to Sakayanagi.”

“Speaking of which, you seemed to talk to him often while you two were together in the group.”

Suddenly, I looked at Yamamura's profile and saw that the joyful look she had earlier had faded away.

The most accurate word I could use to describe her expression was “uninterested.” Either she was fond of Tokitō, or she had something on her mind regarding Sakayanagi.

Either one could be applied to her.

“What do you think about Sakayanagi?”

I asked this question not because I wanted to probe, but because I was genuinely curious about their relationship.

“Huh?”

Yamamura, whose attention was elsewhere when I asked, asked back in surprise.

“I was wondering how someone feels seeing a competent Class A leader from the perspective of their peers.”

“Well, I don't really know. I'm not close to anyone in particular to begin with, and moreover, I've hardly ever talked to Sakayanagi-san.”

She laughed to herself as she said this. She meant that she had no friends because of her own shadowy nature.

In other words, was it simply a feeling caused by admiration, like envying Kitō, whom Sakayanagi spoke too casually?

“Then why don't you take this opportunity to ask Tokitō out? He might take you up on the offer.”

“As expected, I don't have that much courage.”

“What if he asked you?”

“Isn't this a conversation for boys?”

It was meant to be a light joke, but Yamamura pulled back more than I expected.

“My bad. Maybe I took it too lightly.”

Even if they didn't think anything of each other, it was natural to be sensitive when it came to matters of men and women.

“I don't mind. You said it for my sake. Thank you.”

I looked at Yamamura and then around at the students present.

New people, new friends. Truth and lies, those who saw through and those who were seen through. The students were exploring each other's guts through the exchange of checks and balances.

Which class would be the winner in the future?

“I can't right now, but... I'll think about it for a bit.”

Yamamura replied as she added at the end.

“That's good.”

We stopped exchanging words at this point and turned our attention to the match. Albert was exhibiting his powerful arms, but his accuracy wasn't as good, so the winner was ultimately decided by Sudō's agility and precise attacks.

Sudō was a quintessential top-class athlete in any situation. Horikita also gave him a generous round of applause. At a distance, Onodera also seemed to be cheering him on in an innocent manner.

The second match followed. The second match was a mixed-gender battle, but there were no students with outstanding athleticism like Sudō and Albert, so the game was more like a friendly game than a serious competition.

The round ended with the two sides praising each other for a good fight and saying that they had a good time.

“It's time for you to go on, isn't it? Good luck.”

Finally, the third match. The battle between me, Ibuki, and the Horikita team began.

“Let's do our best together, Yamamura.”

“What?”

I called out to her, and she looked at me with a vacant look on her face.

“I asked Yōsuke to enter your name as well.”

“Eh, eh! Wow, I can't do that. I'm not an asset, I'm just a liability.”

“If you lose, I'll make up the points, so don't worry.”

“That's not the point. We won't win.”

“I'm not worried about that; I'll make up the points if we lose. Let's go.”

“Oh no...”

As I started to walk away, Yamamura followed me, although she showed some hesitation.

“Oh, I don't really know how to play...”

“Don't worry. You saw the game earlier; this is just a simple game.”

“But... It looks hard.”

“I'm going to win!”

Ibuki, bursting with fighting spirit, picked up a snowball, grasped it, and began the sequence of actions to throw it.

I instructed Yamamura to move back to the very rear. The students in front of us would target us, so we would avoid them.

I wanted her to focus on enjoying herself for as long as possible rather than trying to hit someone with a snowball and eliminate them.

When the game began, similar to the previous two rounds, many snowballs gathered on the students fighting on the front lines.

On the other hand, snowballs that missed or aimed at the rear also flew in, but if you were careful, you wouldn't be hit.

“Wah, wah!”

Yamamura had no time to gather and throw snowballs and was desperately dodging them. However, one of the several snowballs flew at an angle closing in on Yamamura's left hip.

“W-Wait...!”

In order to save Yamamura, I pulled on her right arm to avoid being hit, although I didn't have permission to do so.

“I'm sorry, thank you for saving me.”

“The number of people is decreasing and the battle between the front lines is intensifying. Let's make snowballs while we can.”

“Yes, yes, yes...”

The snowballs that she hurriedly gathered up turned out to be bigger than I had expected.

It didn't look like they were going to fly very far, but I didn't say anything because I thought it would be interesting.

“Eeeeeee...”

With a noise that sounded far from spirited, a large snowball flew through the air.

It then landed with a thud in our allied zone.

“Ah...”

“Don't worry about it. You should throw a smaller one this time.”

“Yes, okay.”

Yamamura hurriedly started collecting snow again. Meanwhile, the game kept going on, and the students were getting knocked down and eliminated.

I wish I could let her beat at least one of them, but... When Yamamura completed her second snowball, she was so focused on throwing it that she threw it almost directly downwards.

“Ah, ugh!”

Three of our team's vanguard players were killed, and the opponents began to focus on Yamamura. I moved away from her to attract their attention and stepped forward.

I quickly gathered snow and hit Class D's Nakashini, who was trying to aim a snowball at me. But this backfired. Yamamura, who had forgotten how to dodge

and was looking desperately at the snow at her feet, was hit in the head by a snowball shot by Class A's Yano.

"Oh...!"

The snowball she clutched so tightly fell out of her grasp, and Yamamura hurried out of the area with her hands in the air. She was depressed and frustrated, and it showed on her face.

I wonder if she was able to experience at least a little of the snowball fight's tension and fun.

After that, as we repeatedly hit each other, we were eliminated one after another, and the only one left on the other team was Horikita.

On the other hand, there were two remaining on our side. The situation was naturally in our favor.

Ibuki stood behind me and crossed her arms.

"You're in my way.

"I know."

Horikita shot a snowball, and I caught it with my hand rather than dodging.

The catch, of course, was illegal.

"What are you trying to do?"

"Ibuki wants a one-on-one. Our leader says we're going to win, so I think we should go with it."

It was only for a little while, but I actually enjoyed the snowball fight and I wanted nothing more.

Helping her to beat Horikita wouldn't be fun. On the other hand, I was genuinely interested in a showdown between these two, who weren't very different in ability.

"I don't like this one bit, but oh well. I can concentrate on Ibuki-san alone."

"You've got it, Ibuki. You're responsible for getting the souvenir money."

"Shut up and get out of here. There's no way I'm going to lose to Horikita."

With many people watching, the battle between Horikita and Ibuki was about to begin. In this battle, there was no rule for a draw. If the referee decided that the two were hit at the same time, it would mean a continuation of the fight into overtime. It was just a snowball fight, but for both sides, it was a fight they couldn't lose.

"There's nothing like a fight that's definitely black and white."

Ibuki, who had been wearing gloves for the snowball fight, took them off and clutched the snowball in her right hand.

It was probably a strategy to abandon the cold resistance and improve the accuracy of her throws.

Horikita seemed to fight without removing her gloves, fearing that she would lose control of her fingers due to the cold.

For a short-term battle, Ibuki had the advantage, and for a long-term battle, Horikita did.

“I'm sorry, I couldn't help you at all.”

Yamamura muttered, her shoulders still moving up and down, perhaps still a little out of breath.

“That's okay. Did you enjoy it, even just a little?”

“Yes. I wish I could've tried harder.”

Saying this, Yamamura's mouth turned up into a smile, though only slightly. Even if it was impossible to have a snowball fight with the same participants, there will be an opportunity to compete in some type of competition in the future.

I hope she'll hold onto her regrets until then and take revenge. Returning to the gallery, we focused our attention on the two girls facing each other one-on-one.

“This is a serious competition, isn't it?”

“Yes.”

Ibuki wanted to settle the match quickly, but Horikita saw through that and prioritized evasion over attack.

“You're moving so much!”

Ibuki's irritation and the cold her fingertips felt were becoming increasingly unbearable. She began to show signs of impatience. As the battle began to drag on, Ibuki aimed her eighth snowball at Horikita, and it grazed her cheek.



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“You're gonna have to give me the win!”

“That's not going to happen.” Despite showing fatigue, Ibuki's gripped fastball headed for Horikita again.

While simultaneously avoiding it, she released a snowball that she had been holding for a while, as if it were a counter.

But as one would expect from Ibuki, she was very careful and didn't let her guard down even though she was tired. Despite her exhaustion, she remained on guard and dodged the snowball, even though it knocked her out of her stance.

“Your fatigue seems to be at its peak, so let's end this here.”

Horikita, on the other hand, didn't seem to want to fight any longer, and seemed to shift her focus to attacking.

In other words, both sides were prepared to give it their all. The battle dragged on. Horikita's snowball, coming toward Ibuki, dispersed mid-air.

Perhaps because her grip wasn't firm enough, it seemed to lose momentum. As a result, only the flying fragments of the snowball hit Ibuki. Horikita, on the other hand, tried to just barely dodge the snowball flying from Ibuki, but she couldn't avoid it completely and it passed through her left arm, covering her clothes.

It was a solid hit.

Such a delicate maneuver. However, Yōsuke, not wanting to prolong the situation any further, made his judgment.

“Horikita-san hit! Ibuki-san wins!”

“Hell yeah!”

Ibuki struck a strong victory pose and gave a big smile.

Horikita tried to act calm, as if it was simply a snowball fight, but her frustration seemed to ooze out.

“Look, loser! Give me 1,000 points, now!”

Ibuki, not caring about her hands, trembling from the cold, took out her cell phone and stormed over to Horikita.

“That's very annoying. You don't have to gloat so much; I'll give it to you.”

“You lost! You lost, lost, lost! Loser!”

Were they good friends or not? For a while, Ibuki continued to frolic around Horikita.

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We enjoyed skiing one last time that day. This time, all eight of us skied the gentle beginners' course together, rather than separately. Ryūen seemed bored from start to finish, but it was a good thing he didn't act selfishly on his own.

I also bought souvenirs for the first-year students during the remaining down time. Only the evening was left of the fourth day of the school trip.

After I finished bathing in the public bath, I received a message from Sakayanagi. In response to her request to meet, I went to the designated lobby.

It was just after 8:00 p.m., but there were very few students here today. It was the last night, and there would be a lot of talk happening in the buffet hall and in the rooms.

Perhaps she had anticipated such a situation early on, but there were almost no students in the lobby. With a favorable situation in place, Sakayanagi was sitting on a chair, quietly waiting.

“Did I make you wait?”

“No, not at all. Thank you for coming all the way here.”

Even though there were few people around, the combination of Sakayanagi and I was a bit conspicuous.

In that sense, I'd prefer to get the meeting over with quickly.

“It was short, but did you enjoy the school trip?”

“Yes, I did. I experienced many things that I had never done before. Above all, being able to interact with students from other classes was honestly a good experience. I think I learned a little bit more about Yamamura and Kitō.”

I mentioned both names here, but Sakayanagi looked the same as usual.

“I see. I'm not particularly surprised, since you're Ayanokōji-kun. You have a voracious appetite for absorbing knowledge.”

“Are you close with those two?”

I asked a little more in-depth.

“I don't see any of my classmates as special. I see them all as equals. If I say we get along well, we get along well; if I say we don't, we don't.”

Whether she was lying or telling the truth, Sakayanagi answered vaguely.

If you singled someone out, it would be easy for that particular student to feel jealousy or other feelings.

As a leader, Sakayanagi may truly see them as equals.

“Let me ask you why you called me here.”

“Are you done with small talk? Are you in a hurry by any chance? If Karuizawa-san sees you like this, she'll suspect our relationship.”

She chuckled like a little devil.

“I wouldn't want to be seen meeting one-on-one with the leader of Class A.”
“Fufu, I'm kidding. I understand.”

After suppressing her mouth in amusement, Sakayanagi began to speak.

“I learned many things during this school trip. Before we return to school, I thought I would talk to you about the person who contacted you at the sports festival.”

When Sakayanagi and I missed the sports festival and were talking in my room, a man contacted me from outside the door.

“I see. That's a story I'm interested in.”

“Good. It seems that you were also interested in the identity of that voice.”

“I have more than a few ideas.”

Including what I felt from Nanase, it remained very unclear whether or not the caller was an enemy.

“Now, on the contrary, let me ask you, what kind of person do you consider him to be, Ayanokōji-kun? Is it possible that he could have the same origins as you, like Amasawa-san or Yagami-kun?”

“No, I don't think so. If the other party only recognized you, that idea couldn't be ruled out, but he called my father ‘Ayanokōji-sensei’. That makes a big difference.”

“What do you mean?”

“If you were raised in the white room, you wouldn't call him ‘Ayanokōji-sensei.’”

This was obvious among those who grew up in the White Room.

“But is that really an absolute guarantee? If he's from a different generation than Ayanokōji-kun, the rules may be a little different, right?”

“I can't say I'm 100% certain. It's just my subjective impression. One of the major factors is that he called me last year when my father visited this school, so I can guess that he's someone who stands beside him. And the fact that you yourself said he sounded familiar could mean that he's closely intertwined with politics and business, right?”

It would also make sense why he went out of his way to call him a teacher.

A little surprised, but still pleased, Sakayanagi closed her eyes and nodded her head.

“That's right. It may have been unnecessary for me to give you advice. I already have an idea of whose voice it was, but I have yet to confirm it. I wanted to clarify it here today. That's why I called you here.”

I looked at the cell phone that Sakayanagi had placed on her lap.

“But before we clarify everything, I'm calling someone here who might know him. I think he'll be here in a few minutes.”

“You mean there’s a student in the second year who has a connection to that person?”

“I don't think there are any candidates in your mind, correct?”

Correct. I had no idea who she was referring to. Of course, the owner of the voice was in his first year of school, and it wouldn't be surprising if some of the second-year students got to know him, but I don't think that's what she meant. At least someone who would have to know more about the situation than us for her to have a reason to call them to this place. Was there anyone other than Sakayanagi, who knew of either the White Room or the identity of my father, or both?

“Let's continue with our idle chit-chat until they arrive.”

“That sounds like a good idea.”

Letting time drift by in silence wasn't a wise way to spend a school trip.

“How did you feel about this grouping?”

“I'm sure the table that the individual students input definitely had a major impact. As far as I can see, it seems adjustments were made to incorporate not only my group, but also students with extreme evaluations.”

“I agree. The students who ranked the highest and the students who ranked the lowest. And the middle group who were not in either of those groups. It may not be applicable to all groups, but I think that bias was definitely at play. I think they arranged for a combination that was likely to have an impact on the future of this project”

“In that vein, I'd like to ask you something as well.”

“I'm glad to hear that. If you have any questions you want to ask me, go ahead.”

“What do you think about the final exams?”

The composition of each group for this school trip will surely have an impact later on. Sakayanagi closed her eyes happily and nodded her head two or three times in satisfaction.

“I really enjoy talking with you. We always harbor the same thoughts. I'm sure the end-of-year exams will be even tougher than last year.”

One or two dropouts wouldn't be surprising. That's how much Sakayanagi seemed to be anticipating.

“You'll be safe with your protection point, but the class points lost through battles may be large. Aren't you worried that your previous solo reign will be disrupted?”

“Do you think I would lose in a direct confrontation with Ryūen-kun? It's a foregone conclusion that I will beat him.”

Sakayanagi, like Ryūen, couldn't even imagine herself losing after all.

“He certainly has some interesting ideas. There's a term called giant-killing, and he seems to have the power to hunt big game at times. However, that will not

happen in a confrontation with me. At least, next year, I'll be the one competing with your class."

Unshakable confidence. In some cases, the final result is a draw, but that can be seen as an exception.

It was hard to believe that the school would make a rule that would allow for an easy draw in the end-of-year exam. That was what we understood from last year's battle against Class A.

"Or do you think I'm going to lose?"

"I wonder."

It was hard to say at this stage when we didn't even know the contents of the exam.

But if I told her that, she would probably feel even more resistant. It was nothing more than an indication that Sakayanagi may lose, depending on the content of the special exam.

No matter who wins or loses...

"For you, no matter how things unfold between Ryūen-kun and I, there won't be any obstruction to your plan will there?"

Because our thoughts were concordant, Sakayanagi also understood my thoughts well.

"But Ayanokōji-kun, the future doesn't always turn out the way you want it to."

"What do you mean?"

Just as I asked back, Sakayanagi put her index finger to her mouth.

It seemed that her expected visitor had arrived.

"Thanks for waiting."

I wondered if he hadn't been told of my presence. Kanzaki stood by my side, his expression conveying he was slightly surprised.

But why Kanzaki? I had never gotten the impression that he was connected to my past in any way.

"The first thing to do is to gather the people we need to get started. I'm going to start right away, so can you please come this way, Kanzaki-kun?"

"What in the world, Sakayanagi?"

Sakayanagi, smiling and beckoning, made Kanzaki, who didn't understand, stand beside her.

Kanzaki, who had his arms crossed in doubt, still didn't seem to understand the situation.

I wondered if there was any point to this arrangement.

"First of all, Ayanokōji-kun. What do you make of the combination of Kanzaki-kun and I?"

"What do I think?"

“Please tell me your frank impression.”

“I feel nothing but discomfort. I've never seen you and Kanzaki-kun together before.”

When they were actually lined up like this, it really showed.

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“I'm sure you're right. For the students of this school, there's no contact between myself and Kanzaki-kun. We're not in the position of being fellow leaders, and I don't think anyone has seen anything suggesting friendship between us. In fact, I have hardly ever spoken to Kanzaki-kun since I entered this school.”

In other words, she seemed to be trying to say that she had conversed with him to a certain extent before she entered the school.

“How many years has it been since I have spoken with you like this?”

“I don't know. If speaking through someone else doesn't count, it must've been at least three or four years.”

Neither of them could remember the exact date and time.

“May I ask how you know each other?”

“It's a parental connection, but there's no direct connection between the Sakayanagi and Kanzaki families. When you have parents who are well-known in their own right, you are often invited to parties and so on.”

Sakayanagi's father is the chairman of this school and that he's from a reasonably well-established family, given his knowledge of the White Room.

“Kanzaki-kun's father is the head of a company called Kanzaki Engineers.”

Does this mean that these two had the same thing in common, the same foundation of being involved in business?

If that were the case, it made sense that I didn't have any suspicions about Kanzaki.

“What on earth are you talking about? What's the point of having Ayanokōji listen to this? No, before that, let's hear the reason why you called me here.”

“This story is exactly what's relevant to the reason I called you.”

“I don't understand what you mean.”

“I was hoping you could tell me more about Ishigami-kun, who's enrolled in our school.”

Kanzaki's expression stiffened even more at this point.

“You said... About Ishigami?”

Ishigami? There was no name that came to mind among the second-year students, and the only student whose last name corresponded was a first-year student.

“That's what you mean. You're saying you're interested in Ishigami too?”

“You may take it that way.”

“But what's Ayanokōji's reason? He has nothing to do with Ishigami. I don't think he'd get involved with other years for no reason. If he did, it would only be in case of trouble. It's hard to believe that even Ryūen would do such a random thing, let alone Ayanokōji.”

He tried to explain the situation in his own way.

“It's regarding an event in the past, not the present.”

“What...?”

“You still don't understand? You must have deep feelings for the name Ayanokōji.”

“What... No... No way...?”

As if noticing something, Kanzaki repeatedly looked at Sakayanagi and me.

“You've been very slow to notice. Of course, that's understandable.”

“So that's how it is.”

Kanzaki seemed to come to an understanding with Sakayanagi's words.

Then, after looking up at the ceiling and holding his head up, he looked at me again.

“Ayanokōji...? I can't believe you're his child.”

There was only one thing that could be understood from those words.

Kanzaki must also know or have known someone named Ayanokōji.

And it was no longer necessary to guess that it was my father.

That man had strong ties to the business world. It was inevitable.

“Have you been able to shake off the discomfort of me sharing a seat with Ayanokōji-kun?”

“Ah. I thought you were simply interested in Ayanokōji's ability, but I guess you weren't. Since when did you realize he was Ayanokōji-sensei's child?”

“Of course, from the moment I saw him at this school. And unlike you, I've seen Ayanokōji-kun when he was little. Right?”

She replied, not speaking of the White Room, but as if she was pretending to be a familiar figure from childhood.

“So he's not just a random guy. If he's his son, there's no way he's not... Excellent.”

Kanzaki looked me straight in the eye, as if he had reached a point of understanding.

“My father adores Ayanokōji-sensei, and I've met him in person several times at parties and such. However, we've only spoken properly once.”

This was a good example of the kind of case that can come about even when indirectly connected by Chairman Sakayanagi.

Nevertheless, he seemed to have a lot of respect for the man. Since I didn't know his private life at all, I couldn't imagine what kind of behavior he displayed in front of Kanzaki, but I couldn't deny the gap in perception.

“My evaluation of you has changed two or three times up until this point, but it has finally settled. If there was a child of Ayanokōji-sensei in Horikita's class, he must have been a powerful card.”

He seemed to have a high opinion of my father to all intents and purposes and was convinced by himself.

“Well, now that we've corrected the discrepancy in our perceptions, let's move on. You don't know about Ishigami-kun, do you, Ayanokōji-kun?”

“No.”

The very student Ishigami was the one who approached us, it seemed.

“He's one of the young men who admire your father. You know him well enough, don't you, Kanzaki-kun?”

“...Oh. He seems to be fascinated with Ayanokōji-sensei. I didn't have the courage to go talk to him, but Ishigami's different. Since then, he was really proactive in speaking to him.”

“Ishigami-kun's age is one year younger than us, and he's now a first-year student.”

A student who adored that man was enrolled in this school, and somehow, he had contacted me several times, and even indirectly helped with Yagami's expulsion at the cultural festival.

The agenda of this man, Ishigami, is still unknown to me.

“I'm sure you've had opportunities to come in contact with first-year students, but how long have you been aware of Ishigami?”

“I noticed him as soon as I saw the OAA. But since he's not the type to come out in the open, I never had a chance to talk to him; my interactions with first year Class A were through Takahashi Osamu-kun, and it seemed that he was intentionally avoiding contact with me.”

It seems that Sakayanagi herself didn't want to force contact with him.

“Is he excellent?”

“I think that Kanzaki, who's close to him, knows more about that aspect than I do.”

Kanzaki was entrusted with the explanation, but he didn't seem happy at all. Rather, it seemed the opposite was true.

“It's not that I'm close to him. I just went to the same cram school as Ishigami. But if I were to honestly answer your question, then he's undeniably a genius. He's come up with several ideas that I can't even think of, and the only thing I'm sure of is that I've seen it up close.”

He didn't seem to like Ishigami, but he responded as if acknowledging the fact.

“It's Kanzaki-kun's point of view, his personal opinion, but I thought it would be a good reference.”

“But so what? All you have to do is just leave the current Ishigami alone.”

“Can't you at least imagine? He respects Ayanokōji-kun's father. If that's the case, it wouldn't be surprising if he enrolled in this school to check his son's ability,” Sakayanagi reasoned.

While withholding information about the White Room, Sakayanagi led the conversation.

“Ishigami is testing Ayanokōji's ability...? You can't deny it?”

It seemed that her words seemed to make sense to Kanzaki, corresponding to the image of Ishigami he knew.

“We're competing against each other in the second year. Kanzaki-kun, even if your class is one step behind, it's still unclear who the winner will be. Under such circumstances, don't you think it's unfair that Ishigami-kun will play unnecessary tricks to find out Ayanokōji-kun's ability in the future?”

“I don't understand what you mean. But why are you so devoted to Ayanokōji? It should be none of your business what happens to the students in your rival class.”

If left alone, Ishigami would automatically sabotage a strong student in a rival class.

It was obvious to everyone that this was essentially a benefit for Sakayanagi.

“I just genuinely want to have fun,” she said.

“It's my role to bury Horikita's class, including Ayanokōji. It's frustrating when someone suddenly appears and has taken your purpose away from you, isn't it?”

After a fit of laughter, Sakayanagi thanked Kanzaki.

“Thank you very much, Kanzaki-kun. From here on out, I think Ayanokōji-kun and I will work out a plan to deal with Ishigami-kun together.”

Although it was a thank you... It also strongly implied that anyone who got in the way should leave.

“I have no intention of getting involved with Ishigami-kun, so I'd appreciate it if it stayed that way.”

Kanzaki replied without hesitation and walked away.

“We'll talk again soon, Ayanokōji. I'd like to hear a lot about that man, you know.”

He was eager to talk about my father, but unfortunately, I knew nothing about him.

“Well, Ayanokōji-kun. Let's see who Ishigami-kun really is.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Of course, I'll ask him directly. That would be the fastest way, right?”

Taking out her cell phone, Sakayanagi punched in the 11-digit number with a smooth hand.

It seemed that she had done her homework and had already obtained Ishigami's phone number.

Putting it on speaker, Sakayanagi dialed the number, and within a few rings, the call started.

“I figured it was about time you called, Sakayanagi.”

Ishigami's tone of voice suggested he had foreseen it as soon as he picked up the phone. This voice was unmistakably the one who called me last year and the one who visited me during the sports festival.

“You're very perceptive, aren't you?”

“I told him ahead of time that if anyone other than a first-year student asked for my number, he should report it to me.”

“Let's just say it's as good as it gets. I've heard rumors about you from inside and outside.”

She always had her antennae up.

“You could've approached me earlier, couldn't you?”

“I hoped to avoid contact. You don't need to get involved with me either, do you?”

“I don't think so. I thought I had to confirm whether or not you would stand in Ayanokōji-kun's way in the future.”

“If so, what are you going to do about it?”

“I don't think Ayanokōji-kun will be defeated by someone who isn't me, but I don't like the idea of him being yanked aside by someone else. If you're going to intervene, I may have no choice but to stop you.”

“You're going to stop me? You should ignore me rather than do such a useless thing. I chose this school on Ayanokōji-sensei's recommendation so that I could spend my time as a normal student.”

He had entered this school with a similar idea, that was what he implied.

“You can assume that I won't try eliminating Ayanokōji from this school for now.”

“For now, huh? That's a worrisome implication, isn't it?”

“In the unlikely event that Ayanokōji-sensei instructs me to eliminate him, I will do so. That's all.”

His tone was consistently calm, and it didn't seem as if he was lying.

“You've increased your loyalty a lot without realizing it, haven't you?”

“Don't go any further, Sakayanagi. If you wish to stand by Ayanokōji's side, you may do so.”

I'm sure he was just strongly warning me that it wasn't going to be a problem.

“I'm not going to tell you to avoid going against me. Sooner or later, Ayanokōji will find out about me, so you'll warn him. Isn't that the best way to protect his school life? No, if you're calling, there's no need for that.”

He couldn't be sure. But he was considering the possibility that I was eavesdropping.

“I'll let you know if I feel like it. I'll greet you at school next time.”

At this point, Sakayanagi decided that enough was enough and ended the call unilaterally.

“It was him, after all. It seems he didn't have much of an intention to hide it in the first place.”

“It seems like it. If he came to this school to enjoy student life to the fullest, I have no intention of getting involved in the future.”

At least in all my interactions with Ishigami, I had never sensed any danger, and the same went for the current phone call. There was no need to panic now that the possibility had emerged that Ishigami wasn't trying to expel me from the beginning.

“I see. If you make that choice, I will respect it.” Sakayanagi said.

“I'm grateful. Thanks to you, I was able to recognize Ishigami's existence.”

“Now that we have some sense of direction, I am sorry to make your stay here so long. However, may I continue what I was just about to say at the end?”

“The future doesn't always turn out the way I want it to, right?”

The way Sakayanagi said that was certainly something that had been on my mind.

“Ah, Ayanokōji-kun!”

But someone was in the wrong place at the wrong time. I was about to inquire into what she meant when someone else called out to me.

“Um, have you seen Honami?”

I was called by Amikura, who was hurriedly walking down the corridor, looking a little flustered.

“No, I haven't seen her. What's wrong with Ichinose?”

“Look, the school trip is over already, right? So we decided to get together with everyone in the class and chat until lights out, but we couldn't find Honami, so we were worried.”

A good number of people were searching for her, and even as we spoke, the girls from Class D were hurriedly walking beside Amikura.

“From the looks of it, it seems like you've already checked the bathrooms and other rooms.”

“I heard that she looked distressed in the evening... so I was a little worried.”

A concerned Amikura was approached by a girl from the same class.

“Mako-chan. I just had it checked. It looks like Honami's yukata is still here, and I think she went outside.”

“What, outside? But it's almost nine o'clock, remember? And the group is at the inn, right?”

Going outside wasn't allowed after 9 p.m., and if she was out alone, that could be a problem.

“I'll check the big bathhouse one more time!”

Not wanting to waste any more time standing around talking, Amikura walked away.

It was certainly a bit troublesome that Ichinose was absent at this time of night.

“Let's continue our conversation another time. Please go ahead and search for Ichinose-san. Her presence is probably still indispensable to you for now.”

“Sorry.”

I bid Sakayanagi farewell and left the lobby. As long as she wasn't allowed to act alone outside of a group, Ichinose wasn't a student who would break the school's designated rules without reason.

Even if she had a problem, she wouldn't change her basic principle.

I looked out from the hallway of the ryokan and saw that it was snowing.

If she really was outside the ryokan, there were only so many places she could go.

After returning to my room and putting on my clothes, I headed out through the ryokan's backyard.

There was a hill up ahead where you could see the scenery lit up.

This was exactly the kind of place that was restricted at 9 p.m., the curfew. The backyard, which was completely within the inn's limits, didn't meet the standard for group activities.

Even though the area was illuminated with lights, it was still dangerous because of the snow.

Many students climbed to higher ground on their first or second day at the inn.

Therefore, few students would go back to see it again under the cold and snowy weather.

And moreover, it was the last day. They would want to spend a relaxing time at the ryokan.

Epilogue: The Light At The End Of The Tunnel

IT WAS NEARLY 9:00 p.m. and a frigid wind was blowing outside.

The lights at each end of the staircase faintly illuminated my footing, but due to the snow, it was hard to say that I was safe. I climbed up dozens of steps, stepping on the snow to avoid falling. There probably weren't many people who enjoyed coming here at this time of day.

In the darkness, I arrived at a slightly spacious hill where people couldn't see their own breath.

On the wooden deck, I found someone.

They were perhaps gazing out at the scenery, but the darkness made it look rather sorrowful. Naturally, there were no other people around.

I heard that they were present at mealtime. I began to wonder, how long had they been here. The sound of the wind was so strong that they didn't seem to notice my approach.

I stomped my foot on the ground as hard as I could to announce my presence so as not to startle them. I wondered if the sound reached their ears at all. When their body showed a reaction, I decided to call out to them.

"Can I sit next to you?"

"Oh! Ayanokōji-kun?"

"What a coincidence."

"Y-yes, coincidence."

Ichinose awkwardly let her gaze wander off into the nightscape.

"My bad, it's not really a coincidence. Amikura and the others were making a fuss that they couldn't find you. I just wanted to call out to you to chat until lights out."

"Oh, yeah? What's going on? Am I making a scene?"

"A little. I'll just send her a message for now. That should put Amikura at ease."

"Have you exchanged contact information... With Mako-chan?"

"We're in the same group for the school trip. I needed a way to get in touch with her."

I sent a message saying that I had found Ichinose and that I would be back by 9:00 p.m., so they didn't need to worry. As soon as I sent the message, it was read. When Amikura learned that everything was okay, she sent two stamps of relief.

"She got the message. At least now the ruckus should be over."

"I'm sorry."

“No problem. This is the inn's property and we're not breaking curfew. As long as you're back by 9:00, it's your business.”

“Yeah, thanks...”

I guess it was understandable that she wasn't attempting to go back inside just because people were worried about her. School trips are fun, but you inevitably have to share a lot of your time with students.

“Everyone has times when they want to be alone. In that sense, I'm probably intruding on your privacy.”

To these words, Ichinose was silent.

She just continued to gaze upon the nightscape.

“It's cold.”

“...Yes. It's cold.”

Even through my gloves, I felt a piercing shiver as the wind blew.

“How long have you been here?”

“I don't know... Maybe five minutes.”

She answered, but she seemed to think that I would immediately recognize her lie, so she corrected herself in a frustrated manner.

“Sorry, I might've been here for 30 or 40 minutes.”

“I'm sure you're right. At first glance, there aren't any footprints to be found.”

I had no proof that Ichinose was here at all until I came up the stairs. If it had been a few minutes earlier, I would've clearly recognized the footprints, even in the dark.

The wind was still strong, though the snow that had been falling was slowly coming to a stop.

“What I'm saying is probably obvious, but you're going to catch a cold if you stay too long.”

“Right...”

She muttered to herself in agreement, but there was no indication that she was going to heed my advice.

Soon after, the snow seemed to be coming to a stop. But this would only be temporary. The forecast was calling for a strong snowstorm soon.

“Talk about a wild goose chase, what are you thinking about while taking in the night view all by yourself?”

I had a rough idea of what to expect, but I wouldn't know for certain unless I heard it from her own mouth.

I asked her, but Ichinose didn't immediately answer. She just admired the scenery without glancing back.

“I think I want to be... By myself for right now.”

A mild rejection. She urged me to walk away, saying she doesn't want to talk

to anyone.

Or maybe she was just saying that she didn't want me near her.

“I don't think I'm going to leave you alone right now. It's especially dangerous on the way down.”

“Thank you for your concern, but Karuizawa-san would be upset if she knew that you and I were alone in a place like this. I definitely don't want that.”

At first glance, nobody would go this far unless they had another reason; I guess it was that sort of issue. It seems to be in her nature to care about others even at a time like this.

“Certainly, if Kei sees me, she'll misunderstand.”

“Yes.”

“Are you sure about wanting me to leave?”

“Yes.”

Ichinose answered with the same terse answer, still not averting her gaze from the peaceful view.

I quickly pulled away and turned my back.

“I'm going back then. Just make sure you're back by 9:00.”

“Thanks, I'll be careful.”

As I took my first steps, the snow that had momentarily stopped began to fall again. The snow came down even stronger than before.

I spun back around and looked at the back of Ichinose's figure, which had remained frozen in place since I found her here.

She had become much smaller and weaker. When was the last time I saw the Ichinose Honami that was so full of life when she first entered the school?

It wasn't that something happened on the school trip, but rather an accumulation. The water that had been collecting in the cracked cup was beginning to overflow. It would be easy to walk away here, but this was a turning point.

Ichinose's emotions, which have been eroding and constricting her, reached a critical point, as far as I could see.

It wasn't simply that the water was overflowing. If the crack widened and the cup shattered, restoration may not be possible.

In other words, Ichinose's class will be finished, and her path to Class A will close.

This wasn't the time for her class's downfall.

That would be a problem for my plan.

“I'll wait here.” I said and sat down on the stairs leading to the inn.

“Why?”

“I wonder why.”

“My affairs are none of your business, are they? Why are you waiting...?”

“I don't know.”

I had nothing to say to her then. I knew she wanted to push me away, but since she had no coercive power, Ichinose had no choice but to give up.

If she really didn't want to be with me, the best choice was to walk away.

A few minutes passed in silence. Nothing really happened.

“All we’re doing is chatting... Right?”

Either she couldn't stand the silence between the two of us, or she decided that she had no choice.

In a voice so low that it could've been missed, as if she had been thinking to herself, Ichinose muttered something.

“Actually, I've been wanting to ask you something for a long time.”

It was much better than being left in silence until curfew. It would also help to drown out the chill of the snow that was freezing my butt.

“Have you ever heard of the White Room...?”

I wondered what kind of conversation would result from this situation, but the words that came out were far too unexpected and completely diverged from some of the assumptions I had floating around.

Why, out of everyone, would Ichinose ever utter the words “White Room”?

For a moment, Sakayanagi's image flashed through my mind. There were some situations where the class leaders were getting to know each other, such as cooperation between classes these days. But I don't think she would easily talk about such things.

If that was the case, then...

I recalled that she was threatened by Tsukishiro during the Uninhabited Island Special Exam. I wouldn't be surprised if she had memorized ‘the White Room’ from that incident.

“I'm not sure what you're talking about.”

“I see. If you don't understand, Ayanokōji-kun, don't worry about it. I may have misheard.”

Ichinose's words suddenly stopped under the cold sky. She then let out a breath. I wasn't sure whether or not she completely believed my answer.

Just to be sure, it would be better if I planted some ideas myself.

“Where did you hear those words?”

I cut in to divulge that it was something I had no recollection of.

If she didn't answer honestly, that was enough to stop me from pursuing the matter.

“I heard the former acting chairman and Shiba-sensei talking during the Uninhabited Island Exam. There were few parts I could hear clearly, but I heard that he wanted to expel you and the words ‘White Room.’ I was curious, so I did some searching, but I couldn't find anything that sounded like it, so I guess I heard wrong?”

“I doubt you heard it right. At least I can't think of any similar words.”

If she even did the research herself, she was likely half-convinced that it was inconsistent with her memory.

“But why were the teachers trying to expel you? Are you out of trouble now?”

She's probably been meaning to ask that for a long time too. But because of what happened with Kei, Ichinose seemed to have pushed the question to the back of her mind.

“That matter is taken care of. I can't go into details, but there's no problem.”

I could sense that there was another secret, separate from the White Room. It would be more troublesome later on if the former situation was leaked to the outside world.

“I see...”

I could see her shock when she thought she might've been considered as someone with whom I couldn't confide a secret with.

Continuing with these topics wouldn't benefit Ichinose, so this time I asked her a question.

“I have a question for you, too. The Ichinose I know isn't the kind of person who shivers in loneliness in a place like this. She's the kind of student who's surrounded by friends, laughing and encouraging each other. How long do you plan on staying here?”

“I'm having fun.”

“That's not what it looked like when I saw your demeanor earlier. I don't think it was the kind of face you should show on a school trip that's all about enjoying yourself.”

Even this kind of exchange was likely necessary for Ichinose right now. To expose the parts of herself that she normally wanted to keep to herself and couldn't talk about with anyone.

This was something that Ichinose, who continued to be under pressure as a class leader, continued to hold onto.

“Are you really going to continue waiting there?”

“Yes. I'll be with you when I get off.”

“I see. Well, at least come over here. Your butt is probably getting cold.”

“That's a nice offer. I was indeed freezing my butt off.”

I hurriedly stood up, brushed the snow off my butt, and stood next to Ichinose.

Ichinose's side profile hadn't changed from earlier. When I checked my cell phone earlier, the time was about 8:40. Calculating the time it would take to return, it looked like we could stay here for another 10 minutes or so.

If we were to stand in silence until the time limit, that would be fine, too.

With the intention of staying with Ichinose until the end, I decided to wait for her reaction.

Every time the wind blew, snow danced in the air. After a few dozen seconds, Ichinose opened her mouth. A puff of white breath scattered in the air.

“With my way of doing things, I can't beat any class anymore. That's what I was thinking.” An unintentional tear trickled down Ichinose's cheek.

“You can't win, huh? I thought you were going to continue forward as you were without hesitation.”

“But because of that...” Ichinose spun her words, though they were faltering. “Yes, that's right. But results don't follow. Our class is definitely moving farther away from Class A. This is obvious to everyone.”

“And that the cause of this is your own approach.”

“If only I could command my classmates like Sakayanagi-san. If only I could lead as strongly as Ryūen-kun. If only I could coordinate like Horikita-san. I can't help but think like that.”

“That's asking for something you don't have. You can only be yourself; you can't be anyone else.”

She knew this without having to say it. But there are times when you have to hear it, even if you know it.

“It's what I don't have. Yeah, right. I want to be what I'm not.”

“Even if you have to change yourself?”

“If I can win, I'll... Still be fine.”

Ichinose wanted to change. Whether it was right or wrong was secondary, she was just desperate to break through. Normally, this wouldn't have been a situation where I would've reached out to her.

However, the confession I received from Ichinose on the Uninhabited Island led to several unexpected events, which was the main reason she had become so weak. There were still more than three months to go until the promise I made with Ichinose.



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Will she be able to get through this without any help until then?

No, this wasn't a situation in which we should be hopeful.

Right now, Ichinose's heart was on the verge of breaking. The effects of the poison had begun to spread throughout her body faster than I anticipated.

Her love for me and the presence of Karuizawa Kei.

The class was on a downward spiral, with no chance of rising to the top. Although Kanzaki and Himeno were starting to make a move, there won't be enough time for the growth of their fellow students.

As a student council member, I can't see what'll happen to her in the future. The road ahead will be very difficult. She seems to be trapped from all sides. Her future is shrouded in fog.

"I'm so frustrated..."

Her helplessness struck Ichinose with an intense sense of guilt.

If this was a problem that only she had to deal with, she would just be depressed. But Ichinose, who was leading the class, cannot allow that. She was responsible for the whole class's failures. It was because she thought that way that this phenomenon occurred.

"I'm sorry, Ayanokōji-kun..." Her trembling voice strongly conveyed her regret.

"What are you apologizing for?"

"Many, many things. Crying like this only troubles you."

Ichinose was supposed to be stronger and more intelligent. Her hidden potential had completely disappeared because of a heart being too fragile.

A fatal weakness.

Neither Horikita, Ryūen, nor Sakayanagi, who walk in front of the pack, will stand still and allow her to catch up. It would be excruciatingly painful to struggle, suffer, and collapse in place behind them. A gentle reminder that working hard will no longer relieve her of this heavy responsibility.

If Ichinose was to lose both her legs, she'd be finished for good.

It was too early to tell, however... This wasn't the right time.

You aren't allowed to collapse right now, Ichinose.

You are going to fall a bit later. I can't allow you to stop until the final grade exam, the time when the fate of the second-year students will be decided. I won't let you break down.

Whether you live or die as a student, the one who will decide its time and place is both you and not you.

I closed the distance between us and extended my arm to her back as she endured her misery.

Then, I put my hand on her right shoulder and pulled her into a hug.

"W-what? Ayanokōji-kun!?"

“When you're in pain, cry. You can ask for help. Everyone has a weakness.”

“It's... But...”

Ichinose bit her lip, which was beginning to turn a pale blue, and swallowed her words. Her body tried to flee in the opposite direction, but her strength was feeble.

“Isn't there something you want?”

“I... No. What I wanted is no longer...”

“You can't get it anymore?”

She desperately tried to suppress the words overflowing from the back of her throat, or rather the depths of her heart. Still, Ichinose nodded her head only slightly, probably not intending to answer.

“That doesn't matter anymore. That's what I think.”

“But...”

“If you don't have the courage to take the first step, I can give you a hand.”

I wiped the tears that were running down her cheeks with my fingertips. They were so cold that they felt like they were going to freeze.

She no longer had the strength to run away. Rather, she relaxed and surrendered herself to me, leaving everything in my hands.

Gazing at the snowy nightscape in a distant land.

On this day, we learned of each other's warmth by huddling together under the cold night sky.

Postscript

Hello. I'm Kinugasa, and I'm a friend of yours!

How have you been? It's been four months.

I have something important to say to you all, so I'd be happy if you could listen to it.

I have one apology. The character "Ishigami Kyō" from 1st year Class A has appeared several times in the 2nd year version, but his correct surname is "Ishigami." "Ishiishigami" is a big mistake.

We apologize for the delay in reporting this.

The detailed reason is... - probably because I was tired! Then it can't be helped!

We all make mistakes, so please forgive me with a warm look in your eyes.

I hope that everyone who reads this will smile kindly and forgive me, so this story is over. I hope you will take care of Ishigami-kun and myself again from now on.

Now, this time, we are going on a school excursion, so you will not feel the winter vacation of Volumes 7.5. It may be a story of a vacation, but it is an important part of the story that will lead to the future.

The next volume will be the last volume of the second semester, which will be the ninth volume of the December story. After that, we will continue with the winter break story.

I have told you somewhere in the past that the second-year version and after will be shorter than the first-grade version, but it may be about the same or a little more.

I hope you will forgive me with a warm heart, as we all make mistakes.

And let me tell you a little bit about the animation. How was the second anime season in the summer? I hope that as many people as possible enjoyed the first animation in five years. I am already looking forward to the third season, and with that as encouragement, I am continuing to work hard on my writing.

I hope you will continue to support Yosami from many angles.

I know it is a little early, but I hope to see you all again next year with postcards.

Kushida Kikyo's Short Story: A Certain Lapse of Judgement

RYUUEEN TOOK THE initiative to take a shot at me, only to have it backfire. Right after finishing the conversation however...

"Why... to come to my rescue? It's not good for Ayanokoji-kun, right?"

Ayanokoji-kun obviously would not want to be targeted on purpose by Ryuuken-kun.

"There are benefits. You are an indispensable talent in the class. Even if I didn't come here, I don't think Ryuuken would be planning to expose you, but I don't know how he'll act afterwards. You should figure out a way to seal his mouth for good."

"Well, well..."

I certainly reflect on how superficial and rash I am. But why can't I restrain my emotions at this moment? My past failures have led me to this situation, which has done nothing but put a huge burden on me.

If I were exposed, only I would be in trouble. However, the class will also lose a hand that can contribute to the class.

"I must guard my place. I obviously acted for this reason, but..."

"You are no match for Ryuuken. If you voluntarily got into a battle you couldn't handle and blew yourself up, then I'd be troubled. That's why I just stepped in"

What a humiliating word to make me feel doubly humiliated. But... it's true. It's been a long time since I had that first impression of "just an insignificant student" for Ayanokoji-kun.

"At least at this stage, I don't think Ryuuken is a strong enemy."

The person standing side by side with me said what I couldn't possibly say, as naturally as the weather today.

It's not surprising that such a statement would be laughed at, since it's clearly something that can't be done.

"Huh? What is this..."

My brain can't keep up with my understanding, so I'm doing my best just to reply like this. But it's shameful and annoying to see myself in such a confused state.

"Anyway, you don't have to take any risks now. Cherish yourself as you are."

"What an unpleasant thing to say. Does the class need my strength so much?"

My heart felt like it was grabbed by a chirp, and I felt like I was blushing badly. Cold sweat? My heart rate also seemed to have increased strangely.

"That's also another reason."

"Another?"

"I feel like I can get along well with Kushida who speaks her mind."

Ah...? Is he, stupid?

"Don't be like that. Someone who knows my nature can't really think like that, right?"

I don't want to hear words that will confuse me even more mentally. It's clear that I don't want to hear those words, but I want him to say more. This contradiction was destroying my brain.

"There's no such thing. I really quite like it."

"What is this... Where exactly is the seriousness? Ayanokouji-kun, I can't believe it."

I wanted to reply with a smile, but I couldn't. Why? Why? Why? I couldn't play the usual me.

"It's true. There are people in this world who would feel more comfortable with your nature"

"This kind of thing-"

My brain, completely froze. I couldn't look directly at the man in front of me and fled to the wall.

That way I can't see him.

No, no, no! What am I doing?! I need to calm down, there is definitely something wrong with this! This is not... I couldn't be... falling for him?

Impossible. Impossible. Impossible, impossible... Impossible!

By the way, if I think about it, didn't Ayanokoji-kun touch my breasts? No, instead of saying he touched my breasts I should say I forced him to touch them. At that time, I could not think of any other method other than this one, and there was nothing I could do about it.

Hmm? Wait a minute. Strange. Calmly think about it, if he wanted to, couldn't Ayanokoji-kun easily break free of my grip?

Whether it's the fingerprints on the uniform or whatever, I can't remember what I said at that time, but he should know that this poses no threat, right?

"What's going on?"

He wore a harmless expression. Is he actually just thinking "lucky, I can touch her boobs" or something like that?

Ha! Isn't that shameless? Wait a minute. Wait... Wait a minute. Calm down, calm down. Hoo~ha~, hoo~ha~.

Put the boob thing aside for now. It's the other feelings that are the big problem. I'm in love with someone else? Ha-? This kind of thing is not possible, right.

Falling in love as a student or something like that won't do any good for the future. So I'm not going to like anyone here.

The only thing that matters is myself. For the sake of my own happiness, there may be times when I have to get married in the future, but at most, that's all. If I judge that it is best for me to live by myself, then of course I will do so. So, there is absolutely no way I could have such feelings for him.

Recently, I have become weaker because my weaknesses have been exposed to the people around me. It just happened that at this time, I was slightly touched by Ayanokoji-kun's attitude.

"It's okay, it's okay..."

Calm down. Think about it calmly first. So far, I have resolutely played the role of my gentle self to anyone.

In the end, who is Ayanokouji-kun? Wait a second... Ayanokoji-kun is waiting behind me, he should have noticed my abnormality.

So I'm going to turn around and answer him with a smile, saying that I'm fine although I'm feeling a little sick. That's the usual me all the time. I turn around with my mind made up.

"I'm just a little dizzy, but I'm fine! It's oka-!"

The moment I turned around and saw Ayanokoji-kun's face, I paused.

"Are you really okay?"

Because objectively speaking, I made a rather strange sound, so Ayanokoji-kun naturally asked.

Don't look over here! No, no, I'm still shaking...!

Confused, haunted. This- this is impossible.

I'm absolutely haunted!!!

Miki Yamamura's Short Story: A Subtle Change

EARLY IN THE morning, the second-years were enjoying themselves with a snowball fight.

I couldn't hide the confusion in my heart as I blended into the light. I was supposed to live a low key, quiet, solitary life. But he, as a matter of course, found the inconspicuous me and approached me.

"It's so lively."

He took the initiative to say hello...

This is also a change in itself.

"Well, it does look fun for sure."

Ayanokoji-kun replied while glancing at my bare hands.

"Hoo..."

My heart started beating faster and I purposely exhaled hot air into my hands.

"Did you forget your gloves again?"

"Yes."

After answering, I couldn't bear the nervousness of lying and confessed immediately.

"I'm sorry, I'm just kidding. I'm carrying them with me."

Without thinking about it, I had already blurted it out.

"I didn't realize you were a comedian."

Ayanokouji-kun spoke with his unchanging attitude, without a smile on his face.

"Sure enough... does it not suit my style?"

After asking back uneasily, he shook his head in denial.

"No, it's fine, isn't it? It's good to form a group and then slowly develop a bond."

That's great... The confusion in my mind wasn't an illusion.

"I... feel the same way. My presence is weak and I am rarely noticed no matter what I do. But Kushida-san, Nishino-san, Amikura-san and everyone in the group watched me and saw me as a companion. Thanks to this group, not only the girls, but the boys as well. It was a completely different experience from what I thought it would be like before."

I said that much at once. It was as if I had said all the things that had been in my heart until now.

"What I thought would be a long school trip is coming to an end today."

It's been a long school trip.

A school trip to investigate the enemy.

But now... I'm questioning whether I still feel that way...

Sae Chabashira's Short Story:

Confused but Resolute

"I'M GOING BACK to my room! Bye!"

After shouting loudly to the extent of causing a nuisance to the hotel, Chie left unhappily. As a teacher, I was shocked to see her acting like this.

"I'm sorry for what happened earlier." she said, as if she was complaining, probably because she was a little drunk.

If she hadn't been drunk, she wouldn't have let anyone see her like this, right?

"It's okay, it's just a joke after drinking, I'll put a deaf ear to it." Horikita said something unlike a student.

"You're really strict, Horikita"

"You're a little concerned, aren't you, sensei?"

"To be honest, it's impossible not to think about it. Your class is so different from the one I took three years ago."

Of course, the students are not the only ones to blame for what happened in the last class. It is also the responsibility of the class teacher who was not motivated to move up to Class A. In other words, it means that it is inseparable from my inaction. At that time, if I had harboured the same enthusiasm as I do now, there might have been some possibilities.

No... That's a bit of an exaggeration. Even excluding my own reasons, the class is now growing beyond imagination. The main reason for this... is undoubtedly the presence of Kiyotaka Ayanokoji.

"I don't know if Ayanokoji-kun is a Joker, however I can't deny that he is strong as a fellow classmate. But I don't plan to have any scruples about it."

[Note: Joker refers to the trump card in poker, the big monster.]

As if reading my heart, my heart beat a little faster.

"Since this card is assigned to your class, you should use it to fight, shouldn't you? After all, we're aiming for Class A."

"Yes. That's my intention, too."

The sense of unfairness caused by overuse of powerful cards. I can't let that make me waver and hold back. It would be too rude to the students of other classes who are serious about the class competition.

"Okay... I'm going to go find Chie, if I leave her alone she might drink until dawn."

Even so, I can't treat the matter of Chie casually. If you ignore her easily, she may act beyond the teacher's limits.

Then again, I have to re-examine myself at the same time.

Horikita Suzune's Short Story:

Inside the Changing Room

KUSHIDA-SAN AND I went back to the locker room to cool off.

"You're really tough, Horikita-san. Well, if I had persisted in that situation, I would have won."

"That's an illusion. If we had kept going, you'd be the first one to fall, right?"

It doesn't matter if you win or lose, it's when you get provoked by Kushida-san that you lose.

Just now, when both of us were finally on the verge of "dying", Ichinose-san stopped us. Otherwise, I don't know what would have happened.

Of course, it was me who won in the end. Ichinose-san, who had resolved the fight, was called by Ando-san, from her class, as she was leaving.

"Here, Horikita-san. This is cold water."

Kushida-san, who had wrapped her body in a towel, said so and handed me the cold mineral water bottle.

"It's rare for you to be so understanding."

"No, that's not true. I always care about others, don't I?" She added with a cheerful smile.

"The walls have ears too, so I hope you'll be careful about what you say."

That's true. I have to think about that, because I've been treating Kushida-san the way she really is.

"And then again, Horikita-san must be very thirsty right now, right? After all that time in the bath."

"Eh? Well, of course-"

"Uh-huh. If our match hadn't been interrupted, you would have forfeited by now. I still have a lot of room to spare, so please hydrate yourself as soon as possible~"

It's a trap. Kushida-san didn't have her own mineral water in her hands. That is to say, the match is not over yet.

"What a bore. Hydration is another matter, but the bathing endurance race is a draw, right?"

"That's fine. Please, I'll drink after Horikita-san finishes her drink."

She acted like she was possessed by Ibuki-san. I was a little dissatisfied. But then again, drinking now always feels like I'm being led by the nose.

"You're the one who should drink it before you get dehydrated. I'll get my own share."

I excused myself from the mineral water bottle, and Kushida-san didn't take it either. As a result, neither of us drank water where we could see each other. Finally, both of us left the large bath and I went to a deserted place to have a wonderful drink.

Royal MTLs Afterword

Hey there everyone, It's Cast. It feels kinda weird writing one of these for the first time since Prince is usually the one to do it, but due to some personal issues, he was a little busy this time around. Anyways, I'd like to express my gratitude to the entire RoyalMTLs team for the sweat and tears they poured into this volume. This was definitely not an easy volume to translate, and it couldn't have been done without them. I appreciate every single one of you for your hard work. Further thanks also go to all of you readers out there that have been supporting us throughout this long journey. Thanks to you we were able to reach 10K members in our discord server! It is a surreal feeling to be a part of such an accomplishment and know that we are the largest COTE community in the world.

I once again thank all of you for reading from us and the continuous support you have provided. This could not have been done without you all sharing the same passion as us for the Classroom of the Elite series.

Thanks again and see you all when Volume 0 is released.

As always, a big shout out to Kinugasa (the author) for writing this novel in the first place, please do support him by buying one of the official copies of Classroom of The Elite somewhere down the line.

Keep checking in on our website to be updated on Classroom of The Elite translations and consider joining our discord if you haven't already!

<https://royalmtls.com>

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Credit

PrinceYG#5766 - Translator

“Nagumo is literally the strongest student in ANHS”

Rhymar#7433 - Translator

“Kushida is the strongest girl in ANHS”

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“Honami's development is going just as expected. Dear Kei fanatics... please overlook the NTRing you had to endure. It's clearly just bait, after all. Or is it? Can't wait for the Karuizawa/Ichinose cat fight next volume! Fufu.”

Alya#7028 - Illustrator

“My twitter is: @Alya_116”

BGS003#2745 - Illustration Cleaner

“Nagumo > Ishigami”

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“Ryūen hot”

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“Damn Kushida end game girl”

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“Everything I Could Ever Want Can Be Found Right in The Depths Of My Own Heart... Except For Money”

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“Koji's the best Pokémon trainer, he's just naturally catching them all.”